





THE BRIDAL EVE



By
Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth.

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THE BRIDAL EVE.

CHAPTER I.

LADY ETHERIDGE.

B It was many and many a year ago,—
In a castle by the sea,
That a lady lived, with no other thought,
But to love and be loved by thee.—*Edgar A. Poe.*

It was the first year of the present century—ere yet steam-ships, railways, gaslight, insurance companies, telegraphic wires, and detective policemen, had expelled nearly all possibility of vicissitude, peril, and adventure from civilized society.

It was while clumsy sailing vessels were the only means of ocean travel, and heavy stage coaches lumbered slowly along every public road in the country; it was while foot-pads still lurked in the shadows of the city streets, to start forth upon the belated pedestrian, and highwaymen, under the veil of night, sprang out to commit their lawless depredations upon the unguarded traveller; while the spirit of romance hovered around old buildings, and superstition lingered in secluded neighborhoods, that the strange events of our story transpired.

It was early in the morning of a lovely day in June that a rather large group of idlers gathered in front of the Etheridge Arms, a quaint old tavern in the ancient little town of Swinburne, situated in one of the most picturesque and beautiful counties in the West of England.

They were standing within the arched gateway, or leaning against the solid masonry of the side walls, that looked strong enough and old enough to have been those of some ancient keep, and which, in fact, had done good service as defences, in the olden time, when might made right, and every man's house was indeed his castle.

By their looks and conversation it was evident that some event of unusual importance was expected to come off.

"The coach will be late; what wull be keeping her?" inquired Broding, the village smith, as he returned, disappointed, from one of these surveys. "What do'ee think; wull the bridegroom be doon for sure?" he asked, turning to an ostler, who had left the stable-yard for the same purpose.

"Wull the young squoir be doon? Of course he wull! Dunnot he send down his groom to speak rooms in the house, with orders to have fires kindled? Why, mun, the young squoir wull never be late at such a time," replied the ostler, in contemptuous tones.

"A good job if un never coom at all. The loikes of yon cooming to marry our lady, and lord it over our castle. When wur it ever known that a Lord Etheridge, of Swinburne, married wi' a communer? But we've ay heard tell that a house is done fur when it falls to the distaff," said an old laborer, from Swinburne Chase.

"I'll tell'ee all what and about it. Old Hastings, the feyther o' this young man, was his late ludship's friend, and were left guardeen by his late ludship's will to this young lady. Well, old Hastings was a knowing 'un, and made the match. There's where it is; and so they're to be married to-morrow."

"Hoigh! Harken! Coome along wi' I; here's the coach," suddenly interrupted the smith, starting from the archway into the street, just as the horn was heard signalling the approach of the Bristol coach, that presently rumbled down the street, and drew up with great noise before the tavern gate.

All the servants of the house and yard rushed out to receive it, jostling against each other, choking up the avenues and creating much annoying confusion.

"Now, good people, room, here, room! You are in the

way!" exclaimed the landlord, dispersing the idlers, and issuing forth in person to receive the passengers.

First came from the interior of the coach an elderly gentleman, whose tall, spare, and stooping figure was clothed in a suit of clerical black, and whose pale, thin, long face was surrounded by hair and whiskers prematurely gray. He was closely attended by a young man, whose Roman features, olive complexion, jet black hair, and deep, dark eyes, bespoke him of the Celtic race, while his plain dress and subordinate position could not disguise the grace and dignity of his air and manner. In this last he was such a contrast to his employer that he might have been taken for a prince of the blood, attended by an old gentleman in waiting.

"I say, Broding, yon's old Hastings and his secretary. I've seen un before doon here," said the old laborer, addressing the smith, as these two travellers issued from the coach, and passed before the bowing and smirking host into the house.

Next came forth a young gentleman, whose handsome person and haughty manner at once attracted general attention. His form was tall, and finely proportioned, crowned by a haughty head and face, with high aquiline features, fair and fresh complexion, light blue eyes, and very light flaxen hair. His expression of countenance, in keeping with his whole manner, was stern almost to repellant severity. Great beauty of person, with great dignity of manner, forms a combination very attractive to most young women, and perhaps it was this that fascinated the young heiress of Swinburne Castle, for this was Albert Hastings, the bridegroom elect. He was followed into the house by his valet bearing his dressing-case.

Colonel Hastings was immediately shown into his private parlor, where he was soon joined by his son.

The landlord stood bowing at the door, and waiting for orders.

"Breakfast, immediately, and the post-chaise at the door in half an hour," was the brief order of Colonel Hastings.

"Yes, your honor. What would your honor like for breakfast?"

"Any thing that is at hand, only be quick."

"Black tea, toast, broiled ham and eggs, and——"

"Yes, yes; and any thing else you like, only let us have it now," replied the guest, cutting short the bill of fare with a look and a gesture which seemed to transfix the garrulous host and strike him dumb.

The landlord bowed and disappeared, and was soon succeeded by the head-waiter, who came in and laid the cloth and spread upon the board a substantial breakfast, to which the hungry travellers did ample justice.

They had scarcely finished the meal before the post-chaise was announced.

The elder Hastings arose, saying—

"Albert, my boy, I am sorry that etiquette does not admit of your waiting upon your *belle maitresse* to-day, or seeing her until you meet her at the church. But *au revoir* until to-morrow, at twelve."

"You will, at least, sir, convey my profoundest regards to my fair bride, and my deepest regret that she cannot receive me also to-day," said Albert Hastings.

"Oh, ay, certainly; that is understood. Indeed, I doubt her ladyship would deign to be seen even by me, her old guardian, were it not that certain documents, relative to the transfer of my trust, require her signature to-day. I hope you will manage to make yourself comfortable here for a day and night. Make Levere see that your room is well aired, Good-bye. Come, Cassinove."

And with this abrupt leave-taking the elder Hastings, attended by his secretary, left the house, and entered the post-chaise to drive to Swinburne Castle.

Their way lay through the principal street of the village, between long, irregular rows of antiquated houses, some of them dating back many hundred years, while here and there a smart modern building, or a highly ornate shop, hinted that the spirit of improvement had found out even Swinburne.

The young secretary, a denizen of the city, gazed upon this ancient feudal village with strange interest.

"You seem to be in a most contemplative frame of mind, this morning, Cassinove," said Colonel Hastings.

"I am thinking of the changes that centuries have made in the living and dying world of man, while these works of his hands, these senseless stones, remain forever the same," replied the young man, gravely.

"Yes; the times have changed since six centuries ago when the forefathers of this village were the born vassals of the lords of Swinburne; when, if a Baron Etheridge coveted the possessions of a poorer neighbor, he had only to take it, and settle the claim of the other by knocking him on the head. 'The glory of Ichabod has departed!'" replied the elder man, musingly.

"Surely, sir, you cannot regret that such a dangerous gift as irresponsible power has passed out of their possession," observed the younger.

"Nay; I regret nothing, except that Lady Etheridge, of Swinburne, cannot add to her park that fine place at Elmwood, because, forsooth, the upstart fellow that owns it will not sell it for any sum that a sane man would pay."

They now turned the corner of the village street, and came full upon the beautiful country-road that bounded Swinburne Chase on the south. The low stone wall on their left hand did not quite shut out the view of the charming scenery of the chase, with its sunny hills, shady groves, winding streams, and groups of fallow deer. Far as the eye could rove, over green hills and wooded dales, the land was all the estates of Lady Etheridge, of Swinburne.

A drive of more than a mile brought them to Swinburne-park church, an ancient, ivy-covered Gothic edifice, coeval with the castle itself, and, like the castle, celebrated in history, in story, and in song. There rested the remains, and there lay the effigies of the old Barons of Swinburne, from the time of the Conquest down to the death of the last Lord Etheridge, who had died five years before, leaving his only daughter, Laura, sole heiress of all his vast possessions. Young Cassinove gazed with deep interest upon this gray old church, until Colonel Hastings recalled his attention by saying:

"Come, Cassinove, we have no time for antiquities. Our business is not with the past, but with the future."

They drove rapidly on, for yet another mile, along the boundary of the chase, and suddenly came upon a thicket of trees, from the midst of which frowned the ruins of the ancient keep, its solid masonry now covered thickly with ivy. Young Cassinove, who felt a deep interest in all these scenes, would have paused to contemplate this venerable ruin, but again the impatience of his employer urged the postillion to greater speed, and they drove hurriedly past. A few yards further on they reached the south gate of the park, guarded by the ancient porter's lodge.

They passed under the lofty archway, and entered upon the beautiful grounds that lay more immediately around the castle.

Swinburne Castle was of later date than the ancient keep, the ruins of which they had just passed, and from which it took its name. The building was a double quadrangle, in the form of the letter H, and having towers at the four extremities.

Behind the castle arose the thick, impenetrable woods bordering the open chase; before it lay a smiling landscape, diversified by parterres of flowers, groves of beautiful trees, and a small, clear lake, shaded by overhanging willows, and adorned by a flock of graceful white swans.

An exclamation of delight broke from the lips of Cassinove as his eyes fell upon this scene of exceeding beauty, now lighted up as it was by the glorious sun of June.

They drew up before the central transept that connected the two long wings of the castle.

Two grooms, in waiting without, immediately came forward to attend Colonel Hastings, who alighted, followed by his secretary. One of the grooms dismissed the post-chaise, while the other knocked at the door, which was immediately opened by a footman in the gray and white livery of Lady Etheridge, of Swinburne.

"Show me into the library, Williams, and let her ladyship know that I await her convenience. Cassinove, my good fellow, you can stay here, I suppose, until you are wanted," said Colonel Hastings, opening a door on his right to admit the young secretary into a sitting-room, and then going on, attended by the footman, to the library.

How often we meet our fate without an instant's forewarning!

The apartments into which young Cassinove had been shown was a pleasant, cheerful morning room, simply but elegantly furnished. The great front window, reaching from ceiling to floor, and from side to side, commanded an extensive view of the lawn, with its groves of trees, its shaded lake, and its parterres of flowers. A rosery outside the window adorned the frame, without obstructing the view of this grand picture. At the opposite end of this room was a spacious mirror, that filled up all that part of the wall, and reflected the whole of the landscape commanded by the window.

Cassinove paced thoughtfully about this apartment, pausing sometimes at the window to gaze upon the beautiful scenery of the lawn, and standing sometimes before the mirror to admire the poetic taste that had placed this glass just where it duplicated the world of beauty without.

While he stood before the mirror, enjoying the reflected landscape, suddenly among the roses glided a purple-draped female figure, that immediately rivetted his attention. It was a woman in the earliest bloom of youth. She was not technically pretty. She would not have been considered so by any superficial observer; but the faces that inspire deep and lasting passions in great souls are not those of wax dolls. As young Cassinove gazed upon her reflected image, as he never gazed upon *her*, he felt as though a goddess had suddenly descended among the flowers. Her form was above the medium height, and well rounded. Her head was finely formed, and covered with a profusion of jet black, glittering hair, that was plainly parted over her broad, expansive forehead, and swept around the temples, and wound into a rich and massive knot at the back of the head. Her eyes were large, luminous, dark gray orbs, that seemed, whenever the long veil of lashes was lifted, to throw a light wherever they glanced. Her nose was straight and well formed, her lips rounded, and, like all the rest, full of character. In the carriage of her head and neck, and in her stately footsteps, there was a certain natural majesty that, even in a peasant's dress, would have proved her one of Nature's queens.

The impression made upon the enthusiastic heart of Ferdinand Cassinove was at once vivid, deep, and strong—quick as sun-painting, permanent as sculpture. He saw this goddess of the intellectual brow and stately step open the window and advance into the room, and as she approached him he felt his whole frame thrill with a strange emotion of blended pain and delight. He dreaded to move, yet, as the needle turns to the magnet, he felt himself turning from the reflected image to face the original. He stood before that queenly form, and met those large, luminous, dark eyes fixed upon him in royal graciousness, as she said—

“You are Colonel Hastings’s secretary, I believe, sir. Pray sit down. You will find the London papers on that table.” And, with a graceful bow, the lady passed him, and seated herself on a sofa at the extremity of the room, took up a portfolio, and was soon deeply engaged with its contents.

After the profound bow with which he had returned her courtesy, Ferdinand Cassinove remained motionless where she had left him. But ten minutes had elapsed since she had glided in among the flowers, and passed him like a vision seen in some beautiful dream. But ten minutes, and life, the world, himself, were all changed for Ferdinand Cassinove. He felt, from that moment, that his fate must take its character for good or evil from the will of that royal-looking woman.

Infatuated youth! Could he have foreseen the long and terrible agony which that goddess-like being had been ordained to suffer, and which was soon to burst upon her imperial head, he would, in the ungovernable passion of his wild, Italian nature, have struck her dead at his feet, and gladly died for having saved her from such unspeakable woe.

Who was she? What was she?

He had heard that Lady Etheridge had a young friend, Miss Dornton, staying with her, to act as her first attendant at the approaching marriage. This, then, was Miss Dornton. And who was Ferdinand Cassinove, that he dared to occupy his thoughts with Miss Dornton? A young man of obscure origin, left to the benevolent guardianship of Colonel Hastings, who had defrayed the expenses of his education at school and college, and afterwards taken him into his family as his

private secretary. Yet all of Italy's genius, passion, and poetry smouldered in the heart of the young secretary, and these were kindled into a sudden blaze by the electric spark of love.

Miss Dornton! a lady of rank, and, perhaps, of fortune! Oh, if she were not already wooed and won! Give him time, and, under the inspiration of his love for her, he would win wealth, distinction, a glorious name, and lay them all at her feet. If this passion was sudden as it was ardent, remember that Ferdinand Cassinove was of the Celtic race. Yes; he would win the world, and lay it at her feet!

In the midst of the pleasing pain of this love-dream the door opened, and the gray-haired servant whom Ferdinand had seen in the hall entered softly, and stepping across the room to where the lady sat, and speaking in the low, subdued tone in which royal personages are addressed, said—

“My lady, Colonel Hastings's respects, and he awaits your ladyship in the library.”

“Very well, Williams; go and say to Colonel Hastings that I will attend him immediately,” answered the lady rising.

This queenly woman, then, was Laura, Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne! Forever and forever unattainable by him! Oh, despair! His castle in the air tumbled all about him, and buried all his hopes and aspirations in its fall. While still stunned by the discovery he had made, the old servant approached him, and said—

“You, also, sir, are wanted,” and left the room to precede his lady in the library.

Lady Etheridge passed on with her stately step and gracious smile, and young Cassinove followed like a man in a state of painful somnambulency.

They crossed the great hall to the library, which was situated on the same floor. It was a great, antique apartment, richly furnished, and stored with the literature of all lands and ages, and adorned with the portraits of such of the old barons of Swinburne as had been distinguished in the councils or the battles of their nation. At a writing-table near the centre sat Colonel Hastings, who arose with the

stately courtesy of the olden time, and set a chair for his ward.

Lady Etheridge, after greeting her guardian cordially, took the indicated seat.

The old servant retired.

Ferdinand Cassinove withdrew to a distant Gothic window of stained glass, and stood apparently studying its scriptural subjects, but really, with senses preternaturally sharpened by the excitement of his heart and brain, compelled to hear and see all that passed at that central table.

There they sat, the guardian and his ward, in close discussion. The guardian, with his tall, spare figure, and thin, pale face, in marked contrast with his solemn suit of black, sat examining a document that lay before him. Lady Etheridge, in the purple satin robe that so well became her superb figure, sat opposite, with her arm carelessly resting upon the table, and her fine face raised, with an expression of joy irradiating her countenance.

"But, my dear Laura," said Colonel Hastings, with a look compounded of pleasure and perplexity, "this noble liberality, I must say, places us in a very delicate position. I am your guardian; your intended husband is my son. The calumnious world already charges me with having made the match between my son and my wealthy ward. And now, Lady Etheridge, should you persist in your generous confidence, and execute the deed of gift of this whole magnificent estate to your intended husband, and he should accept it, what, then, would the world say?"

"Just what it likes, my dear guardian. I am of age and have the right to do what I please with my own. I please to bestow it *all*, not only in effect, but in reality, upon my husband," she replied, with a beaming smile.

"But, Lady Etheridge, I do not know that you, the last baroness of the ancient house of Swinburne, have the *right* to transfer the Castle of Swinburne, with its vast dependence, to an alien."

"An alien! Do you call my husband an alien?"

"He is not of your blood."

"He is more. He is of my heart, and soul, and spirit, as

I am of his. Oh, Colonel Hastings! there can be no question of mine and thine between me and Albert. The deed of gift that transfers all my possessions to my future husband is made out; let it be executed. He shall then never be jealous of his wife's riches, for she will come to him as poor as a cottage-girl," exclaimed Lady Etheridge, with a pure devotion of love flushing her cheek and lighting her eyes.

"But, I repeat, I do not know that you have the right to transfer this estate, even to your husband," demurred Colonel Hastings, who, however, did not seem really unwilling to accept the sacrifice.

"And I repeat I have the right. The estate is not entailed."

"Lady Etheridge, I spoke not of legal, but of moral and social right. Bethink you; it is a vast and ancient estate, with a historical name and fame, transmitted to you by a long line of ancestors."

"I tell you, Colonel Hastings, that ancient and vast as it is, with the historical celebrity that it boasts, handed down to me by a long line of illustrious barons, as it has been, I, the last Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne, value all this not one straw, except as I may bestow it upon my husband," replied the lady, every feature of her eloquent face beaming with the truth and fervor of her words.

"Lady Etheridge, are you resolved upon this transfer?"

"Immutably."

"Then you must have your will. Cassinove, come hither, if you please. Your signature is wanted, as witness to a deed."

Young Cassinove started. He had heard all that had passed; thinking—feeling—Oh, heavens! how this woman can love—this woman whom I could worship, nay, whom I *do* and *shall* worship as the guiding star of my life, as long as I shall live. Oh, that the man who is blessed with her love may be worthy of her! And oh, that I had the old Pagan privilege of opening the gates of life, and escaping its tortures! He obeyed Colonel Hastings's summons, and went up to the table, where he was presented to Lady Etheridge,
as—

"My secretary, Mr. Cassinove, your ladyship."

"I have seen Mr. Cassinove before," said the lady, kindly holding out her hand.

He barely touched the white hand as he bent before her. His own turned cold as ice.

"Now, then, Lady Etheridge," exclaimed Colonel Hastings, spreading out the document before her.

And the business of signing and witnessing the deed was completed.

Colonel Hastings and his secretary then took leave, and left the castle to return to the Etheridge Arms, whither we must precede them by a few hours.

CHAPTER II.

THE TRAITOR.

Her lot is on you—woman's lot—
Still to make idols, and to find them clay,
And weep that wasted worship—therefore pray!—*Hemans.*

COLONEL HASTINGS had scarcely left the room ere Mr. Albert Hastings arose, stretched himself with a weary yawn, and began to pace thoughtfully up and down the floor, murmuring—

"Men think me a very fortunate and happy man; and, doubtless, an unusual number of good gifts have been showered upon me by the favor of the blind goddess—not the least among them would be esteemed the hand of this wealthy young baroness, my bride expectant. Well, we cannot have every thing we want in this world, else sweet Rose Elmer only should be the wife of Albert Hastings. Poor girl! she little dreams that the man who has wooed her, under the name of William Lovel, is really Albert Hastings, the envied bridegroom of the high-born Lady Etheridge of Swinburne. It cannot be helped. I cannot pause for lady's right, or

maiden's honor. Here, then, for a divided life; my hand to the lady of Swinburne—my heart to the lovely cottage-girl; only Lady Etheridge must never know of Rose Elmer and William Lovel, nor must Rose Elmer know Lady Etheridge and Albert Hastings. And now to persuade Rose to go before me into Wales, where myself and my lady-bride are to spend our honeymoon."

And so saying, Albert Hastings took his hat, and strolled out into the street. Walking in an opposite direction to that taken by Colonel Hastings in his drive to Swinburne Castle, Albert Hastings soon reached a cross country-road, which he pursued for about two miles. Then, turning to the left, he entered a narrow, shady lane, that led him to a small, secluded cottage, nearly hidden from sight amid climbing vines, clustering shrubs, and overhanging trees. Taking a key from his pocket, he unlocked the little green wooden gate, and passing between tall, flowering shrubs, he stepped under the vine-shaded porch, and applying a second key, opened the cottage door, and entered at once upon the only large room the cottage could boast. This room was fitted up with a simple elegance in strange contrast to its humble character. The rude walls were covered with a delicate paper of a silvery white ground, and with running roses over it. The floor was hidden under a neat carpet of a corresponding pattern. The windows, sofa, chairs, and footstools were all covered and draped with white lace over pink damask. A rosewood piano of exquisite workmanship stood on one side of the room; a chiffonnier of the same material, with a small but choice collection of books, stood on the opposite side. Upon a rosewood table in the centre lay several richly-bound folios of rare and valuable prints. Over the chimney-piece hung a mirror that gave back the reflection of the whole pretty room, which was in all respects fitted up as a lady's boudoir.

This lonely cottage had been rented and furnished by Albert Hastings as a trysting-place for his love. The whole air of the room was *couleur de rose*. He called it "The Bower of Roses." It was, indeed, the bower of one peerless rose. Here he had been accustomed, during his visits to the neighborhood of his affianced bride, to meet the Rose of his

secret thoughts. But here, also, let it be clearly understood, he had respected the honor of the humble maiden—not upon any good principle, perhaps; but loving her with all the power of his selfish heart, and resolved upon making her his own forever, he abstained from any freedom that might alarm her delicacy, and, perhaps, estrange her heart.

Albert Hastings, the only son of Colonel Hastings, of Hastings Hall, Devon, and of Portman-square, London, had been endowed by nature with many other good gifts, besides his pre-eminently handsome and princely person. He had a good head, and originally a good heart; but he had been spoiled from his youth up, in being led to believe that the whole world, and all within it, had been created for his own private use—or abuse, if he pleased. And if this selfish creed were not now fully credited, it was, at least, thoroughly carried out in his practice—a thing that cannot often be said of better creeds, or even better men.

Albert Hastings had always been designed by his father to be the husband of the wealthy young baroness, his ward. The crafty old man had taken care not to bring the young people together in any manner during their childhood, lest they should grow up as brother and sister, without thought of a dearer relationship. He had contented himself with secluding the young baroness from other youthful company. He had fixed her permanent residence in the deep retirement of Swinburne Castle, where she remained, year after year, under the care of a distant female relative, Mrs. Montgomery, the widow of a clergyman.

There she was attended by various deeply-learned masters and highly accomplished mistresses, all very discreet and elderly, who had been sent down by Colonel Hastings to carry on her education. At the age of eighteen she first met Albert Hastings. It had been planned that she should spend a year in making the tour of the Continent, in company with her guardian and his son, whose travels were delayed for this purpose. It was but a few days before the intended departure, while the heart of the young heiress was elated with the prospect of seeing foreign countries, that Albert Hastings was introduced to her. His handsome person, dignified

presence, and fascinating manners, made some impression upon the imagination of the secluded young baroness. During their subsequent travels over the Continent, his well-cultivated mind, various accomplishments, and brilliant conversational powers so deepened this impression, that the youthful Lady Etheridge thought she had met the man of men, the only one in the world to whom it was possible to give her own heart, and when the expected avowal of love and offer of marriage came, Laura Etheridge trembled at the thought of a happiness too rich for her merits—almost too perfect for this world. Albert Hastings was deeply enamored of the Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne and her vast possessions; but apart from those, how much did he really care for the young girl, Laura?

They returned home to prepare for the marriage, which was to take place at Swinburne Castle.

The Hastings fixed their residence at their town-house, but frequently came down to Swinburne, the guardian to see his ward, the young gentleman to visit his bride elect.

It was during one of these visits to the neighborhood, while he was staying at the Etheridge Arms, that Albert Hastings first saw Rose Elmer. Levere, his valet, had sent his master's linen to a laundress, and it had been brought home by Rose.

She was a fair and delicate beauty, small and exquisitely formed, with regular features, and a snowy complexion, faintly tinted with a roseate bloom upon the rounded cheeks and plump little lips, and a profusion of pale golden hair parted and waved off in rippling tresses from a forehead of infantine whiteness and smoothness. Unlike those of the girls of her class, her hands and arms were beautifully formed, and her feet were small and elegantly turned. A simple straw bonnet shaded her sweet face, a plain dress of cheap blue gingham fitted perfectly her faultless figure, and a white muslin mantle was worn with simple grace. Her voice was soft and low, her manner quiet and self-possessed. Altogether her appearance, despite her humble garb and menial office, was faultlessly lady-like.

Her beauty fascinated Albert Hastings. He secretly discovered her dwelling—a poor cottage, in a narrow, unsightly

street of the village—and he made an excuse to call there and settle his laundress's bill. This was the commencement of their acquaintance. Afterwards he contrived frequently to meet Rose in her daily errands through the village, and, when no eye was near to spy his motions, he would join her in her walks. He found her mind as lovely as her person, and in the course of a few days he, the affianced husband of the high-born Lady Etheridge, of Swinburne, found himself deeply, passionately in love with the humble Rose Elmer, the daughter of the village laundress. He even sometimes dreamed of the possibility of foregoing his splendid alliance with the heiress of Swinburne castle and of making Rose Elmer his wife; but the spirit of ambition was too strong within him. As usual with men, he deceived himself as to his motive, and said that a sense of honor prevented him from breaking with Lady Etheridge, though, strangely enough, that sense of honor did not hinder him from seeking the love of a poor village-maiden. Day by day his passion for the sweet Rose grew. Every hour not spent in the society of his promised bride was devoted to her. At last, fearing discovery, no less for himself than for the maiden whom his false love imperilled, he cast about for some means of meeting her in secrecy and safety.

Through the help of a confidential servant and a city agent, he hired and furnished that obscure cottage in the wood, and one day, meeting Rose, he invited her for a walk, and conducted her to the cottage to give her a surprise, and to watch its effect. As he ushered Rose into the pretty room, fitted up with all the elegance of a lady's boudoir, she made an exclamation of intense astonishment and pleasure. The rural cottage in its thicket of roses, flowering shrubs and trees, and the pretty room, with its gems of art and literature, affected her with many delightful emotions. The novelty pleased her unaccustomed eyes; the beauty charmed her poetic soul; and the thought that all this had been prepared by William Lovel, and for her, touched her heart with profound gratitude.

"And this is your home?" she said, turning her clear eyes, beaming with innocent joy, upon his face.

"This is my home, sweet Rose, and yours, when you

consent to share it with me," he answered, with a grave tenderness that was natural to him when speaking to her.

"Mine! mine! Oh, it is too much! What a beautiful place! Wherever the eye roves through the room it lights upon some lovely object, and if I look out of any window I see trees, and shrubs, and roses—everywhere roses!" she exclaimed, with delight.

"It is the bower of roses, love, and you are the loveliest rose of all. I shall call this cottage after you."

The maiden suddenly put up her hands to hide the tears that were filling her eyes.

"Why does my darling weep?" inquired her lover, going to her side.

"Oh! because you are so much too good to me, Mr. Lovel. And I do not know how it is, but your very kindness to me depresses my spirits dreadfully."

"But why should that be, mine own?"

"I do not know, unless it is that I am so lowly, and of such little worth, and so helpless that I can do nothing for you."

"Sweet Rose, you can make me the happiest of men. You, and you only, can do this," he said fervently.

"I, Mr. Lovel; how can I make you happy?" she whispered, in a tremulous voice, and with a deeply blushing cheek.

"By sharing my home, my fortune, and my heart," he whispered, bending over her.

She bowed her head until her chin rested upon her bosom, and her fair hair fell forward and veiled her blushing cheeks and moist eyes.

"Answer me, sweet Rose. Will you be mine?" he asked, seeing that she continued silent.

"Mr. Lovel, I am too lowly born, too humble, and too ignorant to be your wife. Would it were otherwise, and I were more worthy of the station that you offer me," she murmured, in an almost inaudible voice.

He suddenly dropped her hand and walked to the window. He had not meant any thing like this. Yet the innocent village-girl had naturally mistaken his declaration of love for a proposal of marriage.

How to unleave her without shocking her; how to explain, without estranging her, he could not tell. He perceived that the winning of this girl to his purpose must be the work of time and great patience. He returned to her side, and repossessing himself of her hand, said—

“Sweet love, I did not mean to hurry and distress you. Since you feel a desire for a wider range of knowledge, though I think you altogether lovely as you are, I myself will become your teacher. It shall be my delightful task to open to your mind the treasures of literature and art, and to direct your reading. This lovely spot shall be our study, and you shall meet me here daily, while I remain in the neighborhood. Will you do this, sweet Rose?”

“To educate myself to be more worthy of you? Oh, yes, Mr. Lovel. You almost distress me with kindness. But I have always heard that the noble and good draw their highest happiness from deeds of beneficence. How happy, then, must you be! Yes, Mr. Lovel, I will come,” she murmured, in low and gentle tones, blushing at her own temerity in saying so much.

And thus it was arranged. And daily, while he continued in the neighborhood, they met at the cottage in the wood. Rose Elmer proved an apt scholar. She had already the solid foundation of a good common education. Albert Hastings introduced her to the world of poetry, *belles lettres*, and art. When he left the neighborhood he had left with her a duplicate key of the cottage, that she might admit herself when she pleased, only exacting from her that she should keep her visits thither, as she had kept their meetings, a secret.

Before coming down on his last visit, Mr. Hastings had written her a note, signed, as usual, “William Lovel,” and appointed a meeting with her at the cottage. And now he had come to keep the tryst; and he sat in the easy-chair, impatiently consulting his watch and glancing at the window.

At length a rustling was heard in the shrubbery, a white-robed figure passed the window, and lifted the latch of the door, and the next instant Rose Elmer stood within the room.

“Dear Rose! sweet Rose! do I see you again at last?”

It seems an age since I saw you !" exclaimed Albert Hastings, rising and meeting her.

"It is two long weeks, Mr. Lovel ; but I have tried to improve them," replied Rose, blushing.

"You got my letter, dear girl. It appointed ten o'clock as our hour of meeting. It is now after eleven. You are late."

"Oh, yes ; I could not avoid it. My poor mother is ailing, and we have an accession of work."

"What has my lovely Rose to do with work ? It should not have prevented her from keeping an appointment with me."

"Ah, no, Mr. Lovel ; but this was a particular occasion, you know. There are visitors staying at the castle, in anticipation of the wedding to-morrow. There was more work than the laundry-maids could manage, and so a large quantity of linen was sent to my mother, with orders that it should be returned to the castle this evening, for to-morrow the wedding is to come off. You are not of our neighborhood, or you would understand what a great event that is to us. *Our* lady, Lady Etheridge of Swinburne, is about to be married to Albert Hastings, Esq., son and heir of Colonel Hastings, of Hastings Hall, in this county. Ah, how happy Lady Etheridge must be !"

"Why should Lady Etheridge be so happy, dear love ?" asked Albert Hastings, upon whom the words of the unconscious girl produced a painful and alarming effect.

"Oh, because every one says how fortunate Mr. Hastings is to get so lovely a lady, with such vast possessions. And she must be very happy to be able to confer so much upon him."

Rose met the eye of her lover fixed upon her with ardent admiration, and she suddenly recollected herself, paused, and blushed deeply ; for often, with her, a generous gush of feeling was interrupted by a sudden flush of bashfulness, that crimsoned her fair cheeks, silenced her lips, and left all her beautiful thoughts unspoken.

"You would say, sweet Rose, that this young baroness must be very happy to bring so vast an estate to her husband ;

but, do you know, dear Rose, that hers is not an enviable position for a woman? Wealthy heiresses are apt to be wooed for their money, and the men they marry and enrich are seldom grateful for the benefit; on the contrary, they are often, even while enjoying the fortune of the heiress, secretly incensed against the woman who has placed them under a heavy pecuniary obligation; for men cannot endure to depend upon women. It is not our nature. A man of fortune, who loves a penniless woman, loves her even the more deeply that she depends upon him for every thing."

Whether this was true or false of all men, or of any man, Rose Elmer believed it, coming from him, and a bright light of joy broke over her face, as she thought—

"Then he will love me very dearly, for I shall owe every thing to him."

But the look of alarm and anxiety that had troubled the face of Albert Hastings at the mention of her mother's custom from the castle laundry had not left it. What if, through that channel of communication, Rose Elmer should learn his real name and position?

With some hesitation, he touched the subject.

"The custom of the castle must be a great help to your good mother. But I hope, dear Rose, you do not go on errands to and from the castle. It is much too far for you."

"Oh, no. I have never even seen the castle or the chase, although I have so much desired to do so."

"Indeed; but you have not lost much, dear. An old Norman castle, and the ruins of an old Saxon keep, have few attractions for youth," said Albert Hastings, with a view of discouraging her wish to see it.

"Oh, but for *me* it has the strongest attractions. I do not know the reason, but I have always felt the very deepest veneration for ancient buildings and old families, and most especially for this old feudal castle and the noble race that have owned it for so many centuries. And for this young baroness, the last of a long, long line of ancestors, the last and sole representative of the ancient barony, I feel almost a superstitious veneration."

"Then you have seen the baroness?" inquired Hastings uneasily.

"Oh, no, no more than I have seen the castle. It is very strange, but my mother seems to have a perfect horror of the castle and all connected with it. She never can bear to hear the family mentioned. She never would permit me to walk in that direction. And when the young baroness passed through Swinburne on her way to Bristol, to embark for the Continent, and all the village turned out to see her, my mother pulled me into the house, shut the door, and fell into a chair, pale as ashes, and trembling in every limb."

"It was something else that had affected her, probably."

"No; it was the sight of the young baroness, I am sure. It was the same when Lady Etheridge returned from the Continent. She shut up the house, and would not see her pass by; and she took me in her arms, and cried over me as though her heart would break."

"A strange eccentricity at most, dear love—a symptom of nervousness, perhaps. Do not let it disturb you. Besides it must be leaving her, since she now takes work from the castle."

"Oh, but she did not know it was from the castle. A footman out of livery brought the basket, and asked if the work could be done by Tuesday night, and said that he would call for it then. It was only in counting the linen that my mother found it out. She did the work, sir, but she has been ill ever since. *She cannot bear to hear a word about the approaching wedding.* Indeed, I think that her dread and horror of the castle people is getting to be a monomania. Can you imagine the cause of such a strange mental malady?"

"No, sweet, I cannot. It is a mere whim of old age or illness," replied Albert Hastings, cheerfully; for he cared very little for the *cause* of the laundry-woman's monomania, so long as it served his purpose of effectually keeping Rose Elmer from the perilous neighborhood of the castle and chase.

But the object for which he had requested this interview was not yet accomplished, was not yet even alluded to; and how to introduce it to this pure-hearted girl was a difficulty that perplexed even his diplomatic powers. On the morrow he was to lead the Lady Etheridge of Swinburne to the altar, and, after the marriage ceremony, he was to depart

with his bride to spend the honeymoon at his seat in Wales—a newly purchased property. But the thought of parting, even for so short a time, with the idol of his heart, was insupportable. The fear that in his absence some accident of fortune might deprive him of her was intolerable. He knew, by a thousand tests of character, that this lovely girl would never become his own, unless she was made to believe herself his wife. His object now was to silence her scruples, and secure her to himself by a false marriage, in which his confidential servant should personate the officiating clergyman, and which was to be kept a secret from all, if he could only persuade her to take the step. It was not without a severe mental struggle that Albert Hastings had gained his own consent to this act of deception; nor was it without great hesitation that he broached the subject. At length, when he found courage to speak, he seated himself beside her, took her hand, looked into her sweet face with an expression that might have beguiled an angel, and said—

“Dear Rose, you have known me now intimately for some months. Have I ever in word, look, or act, given you offence?”

“No! oh, no! never!” she replied, in surprise.

“In all this time, dear Rose, have you ever seen in me any thing unworthy of a gentleman?”

“Never, oh, never! Why should you ask me?” she inquired, with astonishment.

“You believe me, then, to be a man of honor?”

“Of unimpeachable honor. I should deem it a profanity to question that. Why, then, do you ask me?” she repeated, with increasing wonder.

“You have confidence in me?”

“Perfect confidence. Oh, why should you doubt it, Mr. Lovel?” she inquired, with earnest fervor.

“Because, sweet girl, I am about to ask you to give me a great proof of your confidence in my honor.”

“What is it, Mr. Lovel? I know, I am sure you would not ask me to do any thing the least wrong, and so I promise that whatever you ask me to do, I will do.”

“I ask you then, fair Rose to prove your confidence in me,

by placing your future happiness in my care. In a word, will you be my wife?"

Rose Elmer flushed crimson.

"Oh, that I were worthy to be so!" she whispered.

"You are worthy of a monarch's love. Too worthy of mine! Yet you will be mine own. Answer me, sweet girl."

She turned her eyes, full of grateful love and honor, upon him, and silently placed her hand in his.

"Mine own!" exclaimed Albert Hastings, sealing those words with a burning kiss.

Now came the most difficult part of his undertaking, to which all this had been but a prelude—to persuade her to a clandestine marriage.

It would be tedious to repeat all the arguments he used to reconcile her to this measure. It is enough to say that he was a man of society, gifted with powers of logic and eloquence that might have swayed the councils of a nation, to say nothing of the mind of a young girl. He was, besides, handsome, fascinating, and in love; and she was a simple village girl, loving, esteeming, and confiding in him with her whole heart. He found the task easier than he could have hoped. Hers was the perfect love which "casteth out fear," that "thinketh no evil." Indeed, she advanced but one objection to the secret marriage—her duty to her mother. But this very argument he immediately seized, and used on his own side.

Her "duty to her mother," he said, "was to provide for her support in her old age. Her marriage with himself would effectually do this."

Then she pleaded hard that this mother should be at once admitted into their confidence. Tenderly, but obstinately, he refused this; telling her that their secret would not be safe in the keeping of a sick and nervous woman, whose reason, from all that he could hear of her, was evidently tottering; and that if that secret should be discovered, his proud uncle would not only disinherit him, and withdraw his powerful protection from him, but would even turn his political influence against him. Then Rose ceased to resist, only stipulating that after their marriage she should still remain with

her mother, who needed her services, until Mr. Lovel should be ready to acknowledge her as his wife, and take both herself and parent to his own home.

This was not all that Mr. Hastings wished, but neither logic nor eloquence could convince or persuade Rose Elmer to desert her ailing mother; and upon no other condition than that of being allowed to remain with her would she consent to the secret marriage. And to this condition, Mr. Hastings at last agreed, especially as there were very serious difficulties attending his favorite project of sending her into Wales, where he and his lofty but unloved bride were going to spend their honeymoon. And, finally, he obtained a promise from Rose that she would meet him at the cottage that same night, where, by a previous arrangement, his confidential servant, disguised as a clergyman, was to be in attendance to perform the marriage ceremony. After which, Rose should return to her mother, to remain during the few weeks of his absence in Wales, whither, he said, important business forced him. This agreed upon, they took leave of each other for a few hours, Mr. Hastings saying in parting—

“Farewell for the last time, Rose Elmer; when next we part I shall say, ‘Farewell, Rose Lovel, my own sweet wife!’”

They returned to the village by different routes. Mr. Hastings went to his inn, and summoned his confidential servant to his presence. And Rose Elmer, full of hope and joy, turned down the street leading to her mother’s cottage.

It was a narrow, dusty, unsightly little street. There was no rural freshness or picturesque beauty about it. The little old stone cottages on each side, and the few sickly-looking plants that stood in the windows, were covered with the hard, white dust that every breath of wind, and every passing vehicle, raised in clouds.

About half-way down the length of this street stood a row of low stone cottages, covered, like every thing else, with a suffocating dust of pulverized limestone. Nothing could be drier or more depressing than the looks of these cottages. Not a green thing grew near them, not a foot of ground intervened between them and the dusty street; the doors

opened immediately upon the sidewalk, and not a bit of passage protected the privacy of the dwellers. Any intruder could step at once from the street into the keeping rooms of these houses.

It was before one of the most forlorn-looking of these cottages that Rose Elmer paused, lifted the latch, and entered at once upon a large, comfortless-looking room, whose scanty furniture had been already covered with dust in her absence. A coarse carpet covered the floor—a cheap muslin veiled the only window. A tent bedstead, with faded curtains, stood in the farthest corner. Opposite this stood a mangle, another corner was filled up with a staircase, having a closet under it, and the fourth corner was adorned with a cupboard, through the glass doors of which a little store of earthenware shone. There was a smouldering fire in the grate, and beside this fire, in an old arm-chair, sat a woman, whom no one would have passed without a second look. She was a woman of commanding presence. Her form was tall, and must have once been finely rounded; but now it was worn thin, almost to skeleton meagreness. Her features were nobly chiselled, and might once have been grandly beautiful, but now they were sunken and emaciated as those of death. Under her broad and prominent forehead, and heavy black eye-brows, shone a pair of large, dark-gray eyes, that burned fiercely with the fires of fever or of frenzy. Her jet black hair, slightly streaked with silver, was half-covered with a red handkerchief, tied beneath her chin, and partly fallen in elf-locks down one side of her face. A rusty black gown and shawl completed her dress.

As the door opened, admitting Rose, she turned quickly in her chair, fixing her eyes with a look of fierce inquiry upon the intruder.

“How are you now, mother dear? I hope you feel in better spirits?” said Rose, laying off her bonnet, and coming to the woman’s side.

“Better. Where have you been? I have wanted you.”

“I have been—taking a walk through the woods, dear mother; and see, here are some wild strawberries I picked for you on my return. Will you eat them?” said Rose, offering her little basket.

"No; I want none of them. You care little for me."

"Mother, don't say that. You do not know how much I love you."

"Hush, girl, you have little cause—oh!"

And the woman suddenly struck her hand upon her heart, dropped her head upon her breast, and seemed convulsed by some great agony. Her features worked frightfully, her frame shuddered.

"Mother! mother! what is the matter?" exclaimed Rose, throwing her arms around the woman in great alarm.

"It is—past," gasped the woman, breathing with great difficulty.

"What was it, dear?"

"A spasm. It is gone."

"Oh, mother, will it return?"

"Perhaps."

"Let me run for a neighbor, or the doctor."

"Nay, you must run somewhere else! To-morrow, Laura—Lady Etheridge, of Swinburne, weds with Albert Hastings, of Hastings Hall. It is so, is it not?"

"Surely, dear mother, the village is full of the wedding, and talks of nothing else. The village children have been employed all day in bearing flowers to decorate the castle church, and to strew in the path of the bride as she comes—they love her so well."

"Yes, she is a high and mighty lady; yet, sweet and gracious as becomes one so exalted. Come hither, girl, kneel down before me, so that I may take your face between my hands!" said the woman, growing more strange in her talk.

Rose obeyed, and her mother, bowing her own stern, dark face, shut that of the girl between her hands, and gazed upon it wistfully, critically, murmuring—

"Fair face, delicate features, complexion pure as the inside of a conch-shell, white, and flushed with red; hair like fine yellow silk, and eyes blue and clear as those of infancy; hands, small and elegant. I have not let poverty spoil your beauty, have I, my child?"

"No, dear mother, you have let kindness more likely spoil me," said Rose, in simple wonder at her words.

"I have not let your person grow coarse with hard work, have I, dear?"

"No, mother; notwithstanding that I ought to have worked with you, and for you."

"Your hands have never been roughened by helping me in the laundry?"

"No, mother; though they ought to have been."

"Nor have your sweet eyes been spoiled by needle-work?"

"No, good mother; I have been as useless as a fine lady, to my shame."

"And I have worked hard to save you from work, and to pay for your schooling, have I not?"

"Dear mother, you have! You have been the best mother in the world, and only too good to me. But I will try to repay you."

"Think of all that to-morrow, child; and when all the country around shudders at my crime, when all the people call down imprecations upon my name, do not *you* curse one who has nourished you at her bosom, when that bosom is cold in death," said the woman, solemnly.

"Oh! she is mad! mad!" exclaimed Rose, in dismay, at hearing these words; then lowering her voice, she said, "Mother! mother! try to collect yourself! It is I, your poor daughter Rose, that kneels before you. Do you not know me?"

"Ay, I know you well, and I know what I say," repeated the woman, solemnly.

"Mother! oh, why do you talk so wildly? It is very dreadful! But you are not well!—let me go for some one."

"Yes; you must go for some one. You must go to the castle this afternoon," said the woman, in the same tone of deep gravity.

"To the castle! I, mother!" exclaimed Rose, in surprise.

"Yes, you must go to the castle; and, when you get there, ask to see her who calls herself Lady Etheridge."

"The baroness! Dear mother, why does your thoughts so run upon the baroness? What is she to us? Besides, is it likely that she will see me, a poor girl, a perfect stranger, this day of all others, when she sees no one?"

"Hush, Rose! and for once obey one whom you have so long looked upon as your mother. It will be the last time I will ask you to do so. Demand to be admitted in the presence of the baroness. Say that you have come upon a matter of life and death, that nearly concerns her ladyship; insist, and she will not venture to refuse you. When you stand before Lady Etheridge, say that her old nurse, Magdalene Elmer——"

"Her nurse, mother! You Lady Etheridge's nurse! I never knew that before!" interrupted Rose, in surprise.

"There are many things that you never knew, my child. But attend! Say to the baroness that Magdalene Elmer is dying!"

"Dying! Oh, mother, do not say so! it is very cruel! You are not sick in bed—you are sitting up! You are not old either, but have many years of life before you!"

"Child, hear my words, but do not judge them! Say to Lady Etheridge that Magdalene Elmer, her dying nurse, prays—nay, demands—to see her this night! Tell her that I have a confession to make that she must hear to-night, or never! Conjure her by all she holds dear on earth! by all her hopes of Heaven! by all her fears of hell! to come to me to-night! Tell her if she would escape the heaviest curse that could darken a woman's life, to come to me to-night! to come to me at once! There; get on your bonnet, and go!"

"Mother——"

"Go!"

"Oh! indeed I fear her wits are wandering! It is not safe to leave her alone!" thought Rose, in distress.

"Rose, will you obey me?"

"Mother, yes, certainly; but let me send some one to stay with you while I am gone."

"Do as you please as to that, only lose no time on your way to the castle," said the woman, in a tone of asperity that admitted of no opposition to her will.

Rose hastily prepared herself for her long walk, and then stepped into the next door to ask a neighbor to attend her mother until she should return, and then bent her steps in the direction of the castle.

CHAPTER III.

THE FALSE LOVER.

One on the morrow woke
In a world of sin and pain ;
But the other was happier far,
And never woke again.—*Stoddard.*

It was a half mile out of the village that Rose turned into the winding road bounding Swinburne Chase on the south. She had never walked in that direction before ; it had always been a prohibited neighborhood to her, and now to find herself sent thither by her mother, and upon such a strange errand, filled her mind with astonishment, wonder and alarm. Her mother, who had always sternly commanded her to avoid the neighborhood of the castle, now despatched her thither ; her mother, who had ever shunned with an intense horror all connected with the family, now conjured the lady of the castle, by every motive that could actuate humanity, to come to her presence ! Her mother must surely be laboring under some transient hallucination, which perhaps the presence of Lady Etheridge might remove. Therefore all Rose had to do was, simply to deliver her message.

Full of doubt and misgiving, Rose pursued her way along the south wall of the Chase ; and soon her thoughts were drawn from painful subjects by the beauty of the scenery that was coming into view.

“ Oh ! how blest is Lady Etheridge in the possession of this magnificent place ! To think that all these beautiful walks, flowery vales, and running streams belong to her—are all her very own ! ” thought Rose, as she gazed upon the picturesque and extended landscape.

In the distance was the ancient Gothic church in the park, and Rose felt a longing to go in and dream away an hour amid its old monuments and effigies.

“ There they rest from all their feuds and forays, very

harmless now, those terrible old barons," she said, as she passed the church.

Next the ruins of the ancient keep in its thicket of wood burst upon her view, and she paused to worship that relic of antiquity.

"To think," she murmured, "that, nearly a thousand years ago, her Norman ancestor beat down this Saxon tower and built that castle! Yes, I do venerate old buildings and old families! And to-day I shall see this lady, the last of her long, long line!"

Further on she reached the many spacious out-buildings and offices connected with the castle—numerous and extensive enough to have supplied a large town with all the necessities, conveniences, and comforts of life. These gave her the most practical idea of the great wealth of the proprietor.

"And, oh, to reflect that one person possesses such vast, vast riches, while whole communities, by the hardest toil, can scarcely get bread enough to eat."

But she was now at the lodge, a pretty Gothic cottage, overgrown with running vines. Passing this, she entered at once upon the beautiful grounds immediately around the castle, in all their diversified luxuriance of groves, and lakes, and flowers, and glowing and gorgeous in the golden light of the setting sun.

"Oh, how lovely! Oh, how enchanting! Surely the scenery of the Celestial City must be something like this!" exclaimed Rose, in a rapture of admiration.

Finally, the castle itself, in all its feudal magnificence, arose before her view. Upon this she gazed in silent wonder and awe, thinking—

"All this princely domain, this royal castle, this regal state is kept for one young lady—young as myself! Suppose it were for me!"

Then blushing at the excessive absurdity of this thought she quickened her steps, and soon reached the castle.

Not daring to present herself at the principal entrance, she walked round the vast structure in search of some door not too imposing for her to knock at. She continued so to walk until she was seen by a footman in gray and white ivory, who came to her and inquired—

"What is your business here, young woman?"

"To see Lady Etheridge," replied Rose.

"To see her ladyship! Quite impossible, young woman; her ladyship sees no one to-day," said the man, civilly; for every one in the service of the young baroness was trained to treat with respect the humblest that came to her portals.

"But, if you please, I bring a most important message that concerns Lady Etheridge herself," persisted Rose.

"I will summon Mrs. Maberly, her ladyship's woman. Walk into yonder room," said the man, conducting Rose into a small apartment on the ground floor, which the domestic the man had summoned shortly afterwards entered. The baroness's woman was a stately personage, primly arrayed, and of the most dignified demeanor.

"Well, young woman, what is it you wish?" inquired the lady's lady.

"I wish to see the baroness, please," said poor Rose, thinking, "If this is the lady's maid, what a formidable person to meet must the lady herself be!"

"You wish to see her ladyship, the baroness! Why, child, the idea is quite ridiculous," said Mrs. Maberly, with great loftiness.

"Nevertheless, I must see her, upon a matter of life and death, that affects her ladyship's own interests. Therefore, you will please to take my name up, lest the baroness herself should be displeased," said Rose, who was firm though frightened.

"Dear, bless us! And who shall I say waits the pleasure of her ladyship?" inquired the woman, loftily.

"Say Rose, daughter of her old nurse, Magdalene Elmer."

"Very well. I will let her ladyship know that you are here, begging to see her; but really, you know, child, the idea of your being admitted to the presence of the baroness is just preposterous—simply preposterous," said Mrs. Maberly, sailing out of the room, and leaving Rose to wait.

We must go back a few hours to the moment that Lady Etheridge, of Swinburne, having executed a deed, transferring her vast estates to her betrothed husband, and having

taken leave of her guardian and his secretary, sat alone in her old library. She remained where they had left her, with her arm resting upon the table, and her queenly head bent beneath the gaze of the pictured old barons, who seemed to look down in anger that their descendant should have signed away to a stranger her ancient heritage. Little did she think or care about frowns, real or imaginary, as she sat there, beaming under the smiles of fortune, and intent alone on generous thoughts. She had just despatched a messenger to Mr. Hastings, requesting his presence for one hour, that afternoon, and she was now waiting for him to come, that she might place in his hands those documents that should make him sole master of Swinburne, and leave her with only the barren title. And how willingly, how gladly, she would have given up that also, if she could have conferred it, with the estate, upon him whom she loved with all the strength and fervor of her strong and ardent mind. She had given him freely all that she could possibly give—her priceless love, herself, her vast possessions—all that she was, and all that she had—and thought it too little for his merits. Had he required it, she would have given her life and soul as freely, if they had not belonged to her Creator.

While she sat wrapped in her sweet love-dream, Mrs. Maberly came in, and speaking in the low tone with which every one addressed Lady Etheridge, said :

“My lady, there is a young person down-stairs, who says that she is the daughter of your ladyship’s nurse, and brings a very important message, that she must communicate to no one but your ladyship.”

“The daughter of my nurse ! Let her come up,” said the baroness.

Mrs. Maberly, astonished, returned to Rose, whom she conducted to the library, and opening the door, said :

“The young person, my lady. Shall I attend ?”

“You may retire,” said the baroness, and the woman withdrew, closed the door, leaving Rose standing in the presence of one who seemed to her imagination to be a queen.

“Come hither, my dear,” said Lady Etheridge, holding

out her hand and addressing her as she would have spoken to a child. And indeed, Rose, though of the same age as the baroness, yet in the fair, soft, delicate type of her beauty, seemed several years younger than Lady Etheridge.

At the invitation she approached and took the hand that was held out to her and raised it to her lips. It was a natural and instinctive tribute to the queenly presence of the lady.

"Now sit down, my dear. You are the daughter of my nurse?"

"Yes, my lady," said Rose, seating herself in the chair at the same table that had lately been occupied by Colonel Hastings.

"And now, my child, tell me what it is I can do for you."

Rose hesitated and blushed. The idea of asking the baroness to visit her own humble cot and ailing mother filled her with dismay. What would Lady Etheridge think of such a presumptuous request?

The lady perceived her embarrassment, and, to encourage her, said sweetly:

"Do not be afraid to speak. I shall be very happy indeed to do any thing to serve her who, for many months of infancy, filled a mother's place towards me."

Encouraged by the amiability of the baroness, Rose replied:

"I have to prefer, on behalf of my mother, an extraordinary request. She prays of your ladyship to come and see her this night," said Rose, reddening.

Lady Etheridge looked up with a surprised and inquiring expression.

"My lady, I know it is a very strange message; but I must give it as she gave it to me. She said: 'Tell Lady Etheridge, that I, Magdalene Elmer, her old nurse, prays to see her ladyship to-night. That I have a confession to make, which she must hear now or never. That I conjure her, by all she holds sacred on earth! by all her hopes of Heaven! by all her fears of hell! if she would escape the heaviest curse that could blast a woman's life, now and forever, to come to me to-night, for I am dying!'"

"Dying! dying! this cannot be so, or you would not wear that composed face! What does it all mean?" inquired Lady Etheridge, in perplexity.

"My lady, I was ordered to give my mother's message, without any qualification of my own. Nevertheless, I will not deceive your ladyship. I do not think my mother in any danger of death; but I believe her to be the victim of a serious nervous malady, that subjects her to very distressing illusions; but so terribly anxious is she to see your ladyship this evening, that I fear it will go very ill with her if she should be disappointed," said Rose, gravely.

Rose waited anxiously the reply from Lady Etheridge, who, although regarding the request as the caprice of a sick and nervous woman, could not treat it with indifference.

"I will go to your mother immediately," said Lady Etheridge, hastily, as she rang a little hand-bell that stood upon the table.

It was answered by a page, to whom she gave the order that a plain, close carriage should be brought round within half an hour.

Rose stood up to take her leave.

"Stop a moment, my dear. You walked from the village?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Then you must not walk back. It would be too much for your young strength. Besides, you would not get back before night. You must ride with me, and you will reach home all the sooner."

"I thank you, my lady," said Rose, blushing at the thought of this honor.

"I have an engagement that will not occupy me more than fifteen or twenty minutes, while the carriage is coming round. After that I shall be at liberty to go at once. I am expecting Mr. Hastings here momentarily. Nay, my dear, you need not leave the room; but when you hear my visitor's name announced, you may retire to that bay window. You will find some prints there that may amuse you for the few moments that Mr. Hastings will remain," said Lady Etheridge. And even as she spoke the door was opened, and a servant announced—

“Mr. Hastings, my lady.”

On hearing the name announced, Rose had turned away and stolen off to the window, within the flowing curtains of which she sat quietly waiting. She heard the lady say, in her peculiarly rich and deep tones :

“Light the chandelier, Williams, and show Mr. Hastings in.”

And in one moment there was a blaze of light flooding the library, and in the next instant Albert Hastings entered the room, approached the baroness, raised her hand to his lips, and said, gallantly :

“I am here by your commands, my liege lady, my adored Laura.”

That voice !

Rose Elmer started and gazed out from her retreat. Yes, there he stood, her own betrothed lover, bowing over the hand of Lady Etheridge, and addressing to her all those tender epithets of love that he had been accustomed to bestow upon Rose ! The poor girl did not faint nor exclaim ; the blow was too sudden and too heavy ; it stunned and benumbed her into the stony stillness of a statue, as she stood there within the shadow of the window curtains. She was cold as ice, her blood seemed freezing in her veins, her heart was sinking, there was a dead, heavy weight in her bosom, yet she was unconscious of these sufferings—every sense was absorbed in witnessing the scene at the library table.

Again he raised her hand to his lips, with more expressions of passionate love, when the lady, with a playful gesture towards the window, indicated that they were not alone. Then they spoke in tones so subdued that they must have been inaudible, at that distance, to any sense of hearing less preternaturally strained than that of Rose.

“I have begged you to come here this evening, that I may place these documents in your hands,” said the baroness, gently pushing towards him a packet of papers.

With a look of interest, he took them up, and perceiving their purport, flushed to the forehead with ill-concealed triumph, as he exclaimed :

“The title deeds of the Swinburne estates !—my adored

Lady Etheridge ! my beloved Laura ! your confidence—your munificence overwhelms me ! You—but you never did your own personal worth, nor my love the wrong, to imagine that any mercenary thought mingled with my devotion to you ?”

“No, Mr. Hastings—no, Albert ! I never doubted, or would doubt, the pure disinterestedness of your regard for poor Laura Etheridge.”

“And if this peerless Laura, instead of being the Baroness Etheridge, of Swinburne, had been the lowest cottage-maiden, I should have loved her all the same ! She would still have been the queen of my heart.”

“The loved of your heart I do believe she would have been,” said the lady, with a beaming smile. Then, with affectionate earnestness, she pressed the documents upon his acceptance.

He made a strong feint of refusing so vast a sacrifice ; but finally, with seeming reluctance, suffered them to be forced upon his reception. Then the interview terminated. With the chivalric courtesy of that period, he dropped upon one knee, raised her hand to his lips, arose, bowed, and retired.

As soon as she was left alone, Lady Etheridge rang a bell, and summoned the little page to inquire if the carriage was ready. Being answered in the affirmative, she said :

“Tell Mrs. Maberly, then, to bring me a dark bonnet, shawl, and gloves to this room. I am going out.”

When the page withdrew to obey, Lady Etheridge sauntered towards the bay window, saying :

“Come, my dear, I will not detain you any longer.”

There was no reply ; but on pushing aside the curtains, Lady Etheridge found Rose stretched in a swoon upon the floor.

“Good heaven ! how has this happened ? Ah, I see, she has had a long walk, and probably a long fast, and she looks very delicate. I should have offered her refreshments. How very thoughtless of me not to have done so,” exclaimed Lady Etheridge, hurrying to ring, just as Mrs. Maberly entered the room.

“Ah, Mrs. Maberly—here is this poor child fainting from

exhaustion; pray, hasten, and bring hartshorn and a glass of wine," said her ladyship, going back to the swooning girl, and raising her fair head, and beginning to chafe her hands.

Presently Mrs. Maberly returned with restoratives, and took her lady's place by the fainting girl, and succeeded in bringing her to consciousness. Rose opened her eyes and gazed around with a stony stare.

"Poor child, you fainted with exhaustion. You have overtasked your strength. Here, drink this wine; presently you will swallow a piece of biscuit," said Lady Etheridge, as she held the glass to her lips.

Rose mechanically swallowed a little wine, and then gazed around the room again, and passed her hands thoughtfully across her brow, as though trying to dispel some illusion and collect her faculties. Then perfect memory returned, a rush of indignant blood dyed her face with blushes, she made an effort, arose, and stood upon her feet.

"You feel better now, my child," said the young baroness.

"Yes, my lady, much better," she answered steadily.

"You must not overtask your strength so again, my child."

"I will not, my lady. I am quite ready to attend you."

"You do not look nor speak quite right yet, my dear; you had better rest a little longer."

"I prefer to go now, if you please, my lady."

"Indeed, if we were not going to the sick bed of your mother, you should not leave the castle to-night," said Lady Etheridge.

Mrs. Maberly then brought her lady's bonnet and shawl, arranged them upon her lady's graceful person, and handed her gloves, and in a few moments they left the room, and entered the close carriage to drive to the village.

CHAPTER IV.

NURSE ELMER'S CONFESSION.

Take my title, take my wealth,
Take my rank and jewels fine.
What care I for rank or wealth,
Since thou art mine, and I am thine?—*Anonymous.*
The tale was brief; but oh the sorrow
It stabbed to that young, trustful heart!
"To-day a peeress!—*What, to-morrow?*
Will *he* from *my* side e'er depart?"

It was by a soft moonlight that Lady Etheridge entered the street leading to Nurse Elmer's house. The street was very still; for it was the hour at which the hard-working inhabitants usually retired to rest. Lady Etheridge was glad of this; for, idol of the neighborhood as she was, she could scarcely have appeared in the village streets without eliciting some well-meant but annoying demonstration of regard from the people.

The carriage drew up before the humble, almost squalid habitation of the laundress, and Lady Etheridge alighted, saying in dismay and sorrow:

"This is the home of my old nurse! This should never have been, and shall no longer be, her only refuge. She shall henceforth dwell in ease and comfort, please Heaven!"

"Lady Etheridge, you know not what a day, an hour, may bring forth!" spoke a sepulchral voice within the house.

With a shudder of vague alarm, the baroness crossed the threshold, and entered the house, followed by Rose. It remained just as Rose had left it five hours before. A smouldering fire in the grate, and a flaring lamp on the chimney-piece, luridly lighted up the scene. But the woman, Magdalene Elmer, had left the chair, and lay extended upon the bed, attended by a neighbor.

"Come hither, Lady Etheridge!" spoke the same sepulchral voice, in a tone of command at strange variance with the relative positions of the speaker and the person spoken to.

The baroness, amazed and wondering, approached the

darkest corner of the room in which the curtained bedstead stood.

The woman in attendance rose and relinquished her seat to the lady.

“And now, Mrs. Martin, take Rose home with you for an hour, for what I have to communicate to this lady must be heard by herself only.”

The neighbor, in silent wonder, beckoned Rose, and both left the house.

Lady Etheridge was alone with the strange woman who had summoned her.

Magdalene Elmer raised herself in bed, and put aside the dark curtains, so that the light of the lamp shone full upon her own emaciated face and figure, as well as upon the stately form of the baroness sitting near.

“Now look me in the face, Lady Etheridge.”

The baroness raised her own large, luminous, dark gray eyes to meet the fierce, burning, dilated orbs of the woman, and felt a strange, painful, electric thrill shake her whole frame.

“Oh, pray do not look at me so ! it distresses me and can do you no good,” said the baroness, shuddering.

“Lady Etheridge, you would be astonished were I to address you by any other title than that you now bear, would you not ?”

The baroness looked at the speaker inquiringly, and did not answer.

“Or if not astonished, you would only be distressed at the supposed hallucination of your old nurse ; therefore, as yet, I shall only call you by the name to which you have been accustomed.”

The baroness could only look and listen intently, being unable to conjecture to what the strange words of the woman tended, if, indeed, they tended to any thing.

“Lady Etheridge, what sort of an education have you received ?—oh, I do not mean as to the polite branches, for I know well that you have had all sorts of masters and mistresses for every art and science that is deemed necessary to the training of a young lady of quality—but I mean to ask

you have you received the education that fits, that strengthens, that prepares you to meet trial, sorrow, and adversity ; for these are the lot of all ; must sooner or later come to every one, even to you, who are styled the Baroness Etheridge, of Swinburne ?”

And here the woman paused, fixing her wild, mournful eyes intently upon the face of the baroness.

“I hope,” said Lady Etheridge, speaking slowly and thoughtfully, “I hope that I have learned gratitude to my Heavenly Father for all His abundant mercies, and humility from my own personal unworthiness, and, above all, submission to His divine will, acknowledged in all the events of life.”

“Lady Etheridge, you have read the Bible story of Job. Job was rich in lands, and herds, and flocks ; in truth, and honor, and love ; and in favor with God and man ! And in one day God, to try his soul, stripped him of all ! all ! all ! left him forlorn, dying, childless, unloved, unhonored, and a beggar ! Lady Etheridge, do you think that in modern times there can be any parallel for the case of Job ?” she asked, solemnly, fixing her eyes upon the face of the young baroness.

“Yes,” replied Lady Etheridge, gravely and sweetly, “life is full of such vicissitudes. There was Maria de Medicis, the daughter, sister, wife, and mother of monarchs, queen consort, and afterwards queen regent, of France, who died of starvation in a miserable garret in Boulogne. The history of the world is full of such instances, and the study of them is good to strengthen the mind.”

“I hope such studies have strengthened yours, Lady Etheridge.”

“At least they have taught me to hold all the good gifts of God solely at His disposal—to be most grateful for them while they are ours—to resign them cheerfully when they are recalled, believing ever that all things work together for good. And now, Nurse Elmer, I have been attentively watching you, and looking at you. There is nothing nervous or flighty in your manner ; you speak the words of truth and soberness, only with a deeper solemnity than usual ; you speak of the

awful vicissitudes of life, and you address the lesson to me personally, with the profound solemnity of one who would prepare my mind for the hearing of some calamity. You have something then to tell me, something the true nature of which, except that it seems to be a misfortune, I cannot even imagine."

"Ah, Lady Etheridge, happy, prosperous, worshipped as you have been, you cannot even fancy any trouble approaching yourself!"

"Ah, yes, Albert Hastings! my betrothed husband! nothing has happened to him or his family? But that could not be; I parted with him but two hours since."

"Nothing evil has happened, or is about to happen to your betrothed."

"Thank Heaven for that!"

"Except through yourself!"

"Except through myself? Nurse, what do you mean? How should evil come to Albert Hastings through me—through me, who would lay down my life and die for him, if I could so make him happier than by living for him."

"Lady Etheridge, can you fancy no circumstances in which it would be a misfortune for a man to marry the woman that he loves, even when that man is worthy of the affection that she returns with all her heart?"

"Hush! oh, hush! there is some terrible family secret with which I have not been made acquainted! What is it? Is there a vein of insanity, or a taint of leprosy in our blood?"

"No, Lady Etheridge, you come of a race with blood as healthy—as healthy as that of an agricultural laborer."

"And no dishonor has ever attached to the name of Etheridge?"

"None."

"Then I ask you again, what is this evil that threatens me, and through me, Albert Hastings?"

"I have a story to tell you, Lady Etheridge, and I had best begin at the beginning; but first pour me a little wine from that bottle on the chimney-piece."

Lady Etheridge complied, and when Magdalene Elmer

had drank a glassful, she drew a deep breath, and commenced her story.

The baroness composed herself to listen to the story of her old nurse, with a feeling of indefinable dread ; and the latter began her tale :

“Lady Etheridge, my father was the game-keeper at Swinburne Chase, as his father and grandfather had been before him. Our family name was Coke. When I was about seventeen years of age, my mother died, leaving to my care one lovely little sister, about ten years old. I became the housekeeper of my father, and the mother of my little sister May. William Etheridge, the late baron, was then about my own age. He had not come to his title, as his bachelor uncle was still living. The young gentleman spent all his holidays at Swinburne Castle, and, during the season, employed his time largely in woodland and field sports. He was often with my father and the under game-keepers. And he was also a frequent visitor of our lodge in the woods, when there was no one present to prevent his talking nonsense to ‘the game-keeper’s pretty daughter,’ as I was called. And nonsense, and nothing but nonsense it was ; yet it won my silly heart, for I was but seventeen. Do not shrink from me, Lady Etheridge. My affections were won — not my honor. And I, foolish creature, believed all his vows sincere, because when he made them he was really in earnest. The spoiled and inexperienced boy believed what he said, when he swore solemnly that he never could love any other woman but me, and that he would marry me as soon as he came to his titles and estates. And if I ever seemed to doubt, then to encourage me and strengthen his own purpose, he would repeat to me from his school reading, every instance in the history of the world in which kings, princes, and great men had married peasant girls — how Peter the Great married an humble country-girl, who became the famous Catherine, Empress of Russia, and many other authentic cases equally strange and extravagant, until my mind became so familiarized with the idea of kings and princes elevating beggar girls to the throne, that really the thought of my playmate, William Etheridge, the heir of Swinburne, making me his wife, did not seem ex-

travagant. Remember, I knew nothing of the ways of the world ; no, nor did he know much more. I loved the frank and generous boy, who lent me books and taught me all he knew that I could learn, and who promised to share his name and fortune with me, and who certainly then intended all he promised. At length **the** boy went to Eton, and then to Oxford. Young men learn a great many more things besides Latin and Greek at the public schools, and at the universities. The boy wrote to me from Eton, always addressing me as his 'Maggy.' He also came on a visit to the castle just before entering Oxford and passed many hours of each day at our lodge. Heaven knows that an angel might have been present at our interviews without offence to his heavenly purity, they were so innocent. Yet that did not prevent the tongue of calumny from maligning us. The injurious rumors never reached my father's ears, who remained as unconscious of the slander as he was of the young squire's frequent visits to his daughter. At length the youth took leave of us and went to Oxford, and it was twelve months before he came to the castle again. When he did, he brought some young men to spend the vacation with him. He came to the lodge but seldom and stayed but a short time. He still called me his 'Maggy,' but he jested about our childish love. And I, who had grown older, began to understand how impossible it was that the future Baron Etheridge, of Swinburne, could ever marry his game-keeper's daughter, and I bore no malice against this young Oxonian, but I retained in my heart a kindly affection for my boy-lover, as though he had been a creature altogether separate and distinct from this fine young squire. And so in my thoughts I separate them still. Well, he went away again, and I saw him no more for two years, for the next vacation he spent with some friends. In the meantime my young sister grew up as beautiful a creature as ever bloomed into womanhood. She had a small and graceful form, delicate features, complexion of the purest white and red, glittering black hair, splendid black eyes, and an ever-varying, most enchanting smile. I was twenty-five, and my sister eighteen, when the young squire came to the castle to pay us a last visit, previous to departing for his tour on the

continent. I never had seen him so handsome and fascinating as he was then. Still I never thought of him except as the young master, and never associated him with the memory of my love; but during the few weeks of his stay he came frequently to our lodge, and always seemed affectionate to me. I used to do all the shopping and marketing for our little household, and often upon returning from these errands in the village, I found Mr. Etheridge in company with my fair young sister. Upon these occasions he would always spring forward and greet me most affectionately, saying:

“‘I have been waiting for you, Maggy,’ or words to that effect.

“Heaven knows that I never had a doubt of his honor, or a fear for my sister’s heart. I had known the young squire from his boyhood, and though we had once been sincere lovers, he had never done, or said, a single thing to wound my delicacy; therefore, how could I suspect that his visits boded evil to my May? Alas! I did not know how much besides classics and mathematics he had learned at Oxford; no, nor how the world had changed him! I was blind, deaf, senseless to all misgivings. At length the last day of his visit came. The next morning he was to start upon his travels. That night my sister clung to me and wept all night. I could not comfort her. She had been hysterical for several days, and I set it all down to nervousness, never for an instant connecting her malady with the thought of the young squire’s departure. The next morning he took leave of us and went away; alone as we thought. That night my May was missing. Ah! I cannot enter upon the details of this sad story. A few days of agonizing anxiety and fruitless search, and then we ascertained that she was the companion of his tour. He had waited for her at a neighboring post-town, where, according to their previous arrangement, she had joined him. My father was an old man, in feeble health; he never recovered the shock. The baron was in a terrible rage, and swore that he would never forgive or speak to his nephew again. He did all he could for my father, retained him in his service at full wages, and hired a young man, John Elmer, to do his duty in the Chase. I must

hurry over this part of my story. Within twelve months after the flight of May my father died. I married John Elmer, and he succeeded to the situation of head-keeper, and we continued to occupy the lodge. It was in the second year of our marriage that we got news of May. He had deserted her, broken her heart, and she was dead—dead, and in a foreign grave! It was then that I registered an oath in heaven to avenge upon the head of her destroyer the ruin and death of my only sister. And to do this the more effectually, I resolved to conceal the fiery hatred that consumed my heart.

“Another year passed. The old baron died, and the young one reigned in his stead.

“I would fain have persuaded my husband to throw up his situation, rather than serve a master who had wrought us such bitter wrong. But John Elmer was obstinate. We remained, and I buried the bitter hatred in my breast—and bided my time.

“The new baron entered upon his inheritance with all the *éclat* that usually attends such events.

“I joined the ranks of his servants and tenants that lined each side of the great avenue, up which his carriage drove to the castle.

“He saw me among the others, and dared to call me to his carriage window, to shake hands with him, inquire after my health, and wish me well, just as though he had not murdered—yes, murdered my only sister!”

“But, Nurse Elmer! you are speaking of my father! Forbear, I pray you, to use such language of him in his daughter’s hearing,” interrupted the baroness, with dignity.

“Patience, Lady Etheridge! I was very patient; for there is nothing so patient as hatred—biding its time! I repressed the rage that burned within my breast, and smiled upon his lordship, and thanked him for his courtesy, and wished him joy of his fair estate, and—bided my time!

“I pass on to other days, when he wooed and won a young and beautiful bride. She was a delicate creature, fair-skinned, blue-eyed, golden-haired—too fragile for the cares of this world, where, indeed, she did not tarry long. It was some

fifteen months after her marriage that she died, leaving an infant daughter of only a few days old. Her early death was a righteous judgment on him, the traitor!"

"My mother! my sweet young mother, who perished in her early youth! Oh, nurse, how can you say such things of her?"

"Peace, Lady Etheridge, until you hear the rest—it is not much. The new-born babe was likely to perish for the want of a nursing mother. I was then nursing my own child, which was but three weeks old. My husband was down with the mortal illness that finally terminated his life. The house-keeper at the castle recommended that the child should be placed in my charge. I was applied to, and I agreed to nurse the infant, but only on condition that it should be sent to my cottage, and left in my sole care. To this his lordship consented. Satan himself seemed to further all my plans of vengeance. My husband died and was buried. His lordship, to dissipate his bitter grief, went abroad. Before leaving the neighborhood he came to our lodge to bid adieu to his child. He put one hundred pounds in my hands, and said to me:

"‘Oh, Maggy, if ever you loved your old playmate, be faithful to this charge—be a tender mother to this nursling.’

"He went away. And then I laid the babes side by side in the solitude of my room, and looked at them. Young infants as they were they were much alike. My own child and my master's were both of the same age and sex, and both little, round-faced, bald-headed, almond-eyed babies, with no more individuality to distinguish one from the other than waxen dolls of the same pattern.

"There, in the solitude of my cottage, I changed the clothing of those children. And three months afterwards, when his lordship came home, it was *my* daughter whom I carried up to the castle to be caressed and fondled, and it was *my* daughter who was the next week carried in state to the family chapel and christened by a Lord Bishop, who came down for the purpose. It was *my* daughter who had servants, and tutors, and governesses to attend her by day and by night. It was *my* daughter who was brought up with the state of a young princess. Finally, it was *my* daughter, who, at the death of the baron, entered into his inheritance as

Laura, Baroness Etheridge, of Swinburne!" exclaimed the weird creature, her eyes gleaming with triumph, as if again she felt the virulent stimulus of hatred, and tasted the poisoned sweetness of revenge!

"My God! my God! Oh, woman, woman!—for I cannot call you mother—what is this that you have done?" moaned the lady, dropping her head upon her clasped hands.

"I have consummated my revenge——"

Lady Etheridge shuddered and shrank away from her.

"I have filled my life with remorse——"

Lady Etheridge again shuddered.

"And I have lost my immortal soul! Laura, no longer Baroness Etheridge—Laura, my daughter, speak to me, I am dying!"

"Oh, mother! mother! mother! mother!" exclaimed she who was no longer Lady Etheridge, as she dropped upon her knees by the bed-side, and buried her face in the coverlet. No reproach was on her lips, nor in her heart, for this great wrong, though whirling through her brain in wild confusion came all the fearful features of the crime; the sacred trust betrayed—the motherless infant defrauded not only of wealth, but of rank, of home, friends, education, in one word, of all her birthrights, and another child, scarcely less fatally wronged, brought up, in almost regal state and luxury, to believe herself mistress of a vast inheritance, to contract herself in marriage to a man of rank and fortune, and just upon the eve of her wedding-day, to be hurled down from the summit of prosperity, happiness, and honor, to the depth of adversity, sorrow, and degradation. And this crime committed, not from the motives of a mistaken maternal love, but from those of the darkest hatred and revenge; and now confessed, not in penitence and contrition, but in a horrible remorse, that half-gloried in, half-shuddered at, the consummation of its vengeance!

Had this woman been any other than her own mother, the bursting heart of Laura would have relieved itself in a storm of fiery indignation; but as it was, the swelling emotions that nearly broke her heart were repressed and conquered during the few minutes that she knelt there with her face buried in the coverlet.

"Laura, Laura, speak to me ! comfort me ! I am dying ! Laura, Laura, you at least have no reason to complain ; you have not suffered by the exchange ! You have received the education of a gentlewoman ; you should not blame me !"

"Mother, mother, I do not presume to do so ; but, oh ! do not defend your crime. Repent of it ! repent of it ! pray God for forgiveness !" sobbed Laura, burying her face in the bed-clothes.

"Repent ?—I undo my doings. I can go no further," replied the woman, gloomily.

"Ah ! my mother, to undo what you have done—to right this wrong, will be more difficult than you think ; for though I feel in my heart the truth of this sad story, and though I shall immediately yield up my possession of the castle and estates that I have so long considered my own, yet, believe me, it will be difficult to convince the House of Peers, before whom this matter must come, that the nameless girl whom you deprived of the title has any right thereunto."

"Will it ? The proof does not rest solely upon my word or dying-oath. Let any one lead Rosamond Etheridge through a gallery of the portraits of her ancestors, and compare her face with theirs, and it will then be seen that Rosamond, in face and feature, is a true Etheridge. Or, if more proof is needed, let any one strip up her sleeve, and look upon her right arm above the elbow, and they will see the family mark, the fiery cross with which, while in Scotland, some ancient Baroness of Etheridge was so frightened as not only to leave its image on her immediate child, but to send it down to all her descendants. Have you, Laura, any such mark, or any such resemblance ?"

"No, no ; and I remember that the absence of the Etheridge mark, and of all likeness to the Etheridge family, used to be commented upon by the servants in my presence."

"Ah ! nor is that all. There are other proofs. The links in the chain of evidence will all be found complete."

"It is better that it is so ; since a question as to the true inheritrix must be raised. I am glad that the answer is susceptible of proof which will place the matter at rest forever. And now, my mother, you are not dying, nor even

near death, as your fears would suggest. You must permit me to return to the castle, and make certain arrangements that must not be delayed. I will return to you immediately afterwards," said Laura, rising, and arranging her disordered dress.

In their long interview, the night unheeded had passed away, and brought the morning.

When Laura opened the door, the first rays of the rising sun streamed into the room. The carriage still waited before the door, and the coachman was asleep on his box.

"Johnson," said the lady, "I am really sorry to have kept you sitting here all night, while I watched by a sick bed. You shall go to sleep when you get back to the castle; but now drive round to the residence of Colonel and Mr. Hastings, and request them to come to me at the castle upon important business that will not admit of delay. Then return hither to take me home."

The weary coachman obeyed, and, gathering up his reins, drove off. The lady returned to the house, and sat down beside the bed of the now sleeping woman, to wait until the carriage came back.

Stunned by the shock of her sudden fall, distressed by doubts of the reality of her own position, and of the stability of her own reason, tempted to believe the events of the night only the phantasmagoria of a feverish dream, and feeling, through all this chaos of thought, the imminent necessity of immediate action, Laura waited until, almost at the same moment the carriage drove up to the door, Rose, with the neighbor at whose house she had spent the night, came in.

Making a sign to them that her patient was asleep, Laura Elmer arose to leave the house; but first she turned to gaze on Rose, the unconscious, though rightful Baroness Etheridge. Since the preceding night, a fearful change had passed over the face of the maiden. Her cheeks wore the pallid hue of death, her eyes were dim and sunken, her lips blue and tremulous; her voice, in bidding good-morning to Lady Etheridge, was so low and faltering as to be almost inaudible.

"How this child loved her supposed mother!" was the thought of Laura, as she kindly said, "Do not be uneasy, our patient is not in immediate danger."

"Thank you, I know that she is not, my lady," replied Rose, in a tearful voice.

"Then what other grief can a young girl like you possibly have?" inquired Laura, sympathetically.

"The heart knoweth its own bitterness, Lady Etheridge—a bitterness with which the stranger intermeddleth not," replied Rose, with a certain mournful dignity.

"Very true; I beg your pardon; yet permit me to be the good fairy who will foretell to you an end, before many days, of all your troubles," said Laura, gently, for not the slightest element of jealousy entered into her heart of the unconscious maiden who was soon to displace her from her high rank.

"I have no troubles, Lady Etheridge; those only have troubles who have hopes, prospects, and desires. I have none; nothing but the bitterness of an arid heart. Do not occupy your noble mind with my poor affairs, my lady. This is your wedding day; I have the honor to wish you much joy, madam!" said Rose, with a deep courtesy, as she turned away.

"Yes, she is an Etheridge—a true Etheridge, although she knows it not as yet. And I—who am I? This must be all a dream, or a delirium of some fierce brain-fever! Oh, Heaven, that I could wake!—that I could burst these bonds of sleep or frenzy, and awake!" thought Laura, as she stood for a few moments like one in a trance. Then, recovering herself, she told the good neighbor to say to Mrs. Elmer, when she awoke, that she would soon return; and, taking leave, entered the carriage and drove to Swinburne Castle, no longer her home.

She was met in the hall by Mrs. Maberly, her woman, who was all in a flutter of anxiety.

"Ah, my lady! my lady! how very indiscreet! Just like your kind heart, to stay out all night nursing a whimsical old woman, instead of taking your rest, with such a day as this before you. And alack, how worn your ladyship does look. Will your ladyship lie down and sleep for an hour, and then take a warm bath and a cup of coffee before commencing your ladyship's bridal toilet? There will be plenty of time."

"No, Maberly, no, I thank you; I could not sleep. I will go to my dressing-room, and exchange this habit for a loose wrapper; and you may bring me a cup of tea."

"Yes, my lady. Will your ladyship look into the dining-room as your ladyship goes up? Mounseer, the French cook that Colonel Hastings brought down, has laid the breakfast most magnificent, my lady," said the maid, throwing open a pair of folding-doors on her right, and revealing a fine dining-hall, with a long table and side-boards covered with snow-white damask, and sparkling, glowing, and blazing with gold plate and crystal glass, while all the pillars that supported the arched roof, and all the family portraits that graced the walls, were festooned with wreaths of flowers.

"It is very well," said Laura, languidly, as she passed on her way up the stairs.

She entered her dressing-room, when a beautiful vision met her view. Upon a centre-table, covered with a white velvet embroidered cloth, were displayed the magnificent bridal presents offered by the friends of Lady Etheridge.

"Do but see, my lady, if your ladyship is equal to it, what splendid offerings! All these came last night, or this morning. I hope they are arranged to your ladyship's satisfaction. This really royal set of diamonds, my lady, came last night, with Mr. Hastings's compliments. This other set of oriental pearls, my lady, were left with Colonel Hastings's respects. This dressing-case of ebony, with all its appointments of solid gold, was an offering from Lady Dornton. This superb work box——"

"There, cease, Maberly. I see all these things. I admire them, and I acknowledge the kindness of my friends; but I am very tired; help me to undress."

"Yes, my lady; but just lift up your eyes and look upon that Indian shawl! If that splendid shawl is not enough to restore strength to the fainting, I am no judge of ladies nor shawls. That comes from your ladyship's cousin, Lord Seaforth, who brought it from Constantinople himself, no doubt."

"It is very rich and rare. There, Maberly, give me my dressing-gown."

"Yes, my lady; and, while you are resting and drinking

your tea, just feast your ladyship's eyes upon that bridal dress and veil; and see this wreath of orange blossoms, with the real perfume in them, such as the French only can make."

"Yes, yes, Maberly, it is all very beautiful, no doubt; but I have now other things to occupy my thoughts."

"Other things, my lady?"

"Yes, yes; I am momentarily expecting Colonel and Mr. Hastings. When they arrive, show Colonel Hastings into the drawing-room, and Mr. Hastings into the library, and come and let me know. And now leave me. I wish to be alone."

"Yes, my lady," said the wondering abigail, as she left the room.

"Strange! oh, most strange! but yesterday Lady Etheridge of Swinburne, the mistress of all this vast estate, the betrothed of Albert Hastings, and to day—to day—only Laura Elmer, the daughter of the village laundress! Yet still the betrothed of Albert Hastings! *The betrothed of Albert Hastings!* That was the dearest title I ever had! I have that still! Oh, thanks be to heaven, amid all the wreck and ruin of my fortune, I have that precious title still! Will he be faithful in my fallen fortune? Yes! yes! Oh, traitoress that I should be to doubt him for a moment. Yes, he *will* be faithful! He never loved me for my rank or fortune! He loves me for myself! Upon the rock of my husband's love I may repose, for I know he will never change with changed fortune! He will throw his strong arm around me against the world! Had this calamity fallen upon *him*, and stripped him of rank and wealth, and name and fame, *I* should have loved him even more deeply for his misfortunes. It should have been the happiness of my life to make him forget them. I judge his noble heart by mine! He will be faithful! Do your worst, fate! Strip me of my rank and wealth, and name and fame, and friends, and all external goods! You cannot touch my heart, where, safe as a jewel in its casket, lies the treasure of my life, the love of Albert Hastings!" mused Laura, as she sat amid the transitory splendor of her dressing-room.

"My lady, Mr. Hastings waits your ladyship's pleasure in the library," said a footman, opening the door.

"Very well, Williams. Precede and announce me," said his mistress, rising and leaving the dressing-room.

"Will he be faithful?" she mused, as she passed along the halls communicating with the library. "Will he be faithful? I shall know now!—nay, do now! My life—my soul on his fidelity! He will be faithful!"

And, with this inspiring word upon her glowing lips, and with this thought lighting up her eloquent face, she entered the library, and stood in the presence of him who held her fate in his hands—Albert Hastings.



CHAPTER V.

THE TEST OF TRUE LOVE.

The stricken is silent!—
 She stands by him now,
 And her pulse beats no quicker,
 Nor crimson her brow!
 The small hand that trembled
 When last in his own,
 Lies patient and folded,
 And colder than stone.
 Of *her* love the angels
 In heaven might tell,
 While his would be whispered
 With shudders in hell.—*Elizabeth Whittier.*

MR. HASTINGS was pacing the floor, and turned to greet her, exclaiming:

"My worshipped Laura——" when something in the expression of that queenly brow, and those steady, luminous eyes, stopped him. Looking wistfully in her face, he said:

"Something has happened, Lady Etheridge. You commanded the presence of Colonel Hastings and myself, and we are here at your orders. Speak, dear Laura, and say, can we serve you?"

"You are right. Something *has* happened. Something of such grave import that I deem it necessary to communi-

cate it to you before our marriage proceeds," she replied, gravely and sweetly, as she took a seat at the table, and motioned him to take another.

He turned very red, and sank into a chair, dreading to hear her next words, as visions of certain gambling and other debts of honor and of *dishonor*, arose before him.

Then resting her head upon her hand, and speaking slowly, she continued:

"Within the last twelve hours, Mr. Hastings, I have made a discovery which may—I cannot tell yet whether it will—separate us forever."

"Lady Etheridge," he exclaimed, a deeper flush mounting to his brow, "I trust that you have permitted no enemy to calumniate my character in your presence."

She looked up in surprise and perplexity. So foreign to her noble nature was the low vice of listening to the slanderer.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Hastings. I do not quite understand you," she said.

"Laura, I have enemies—bitter, malignant, unrelenting, and unscrupulous enemies—who would dash my present cup of happiness from my lips, and move heaven and earth to ruin me—who, to effect their purpose, would not hesitate to abuse your ear with calumnies against me."

"No enemy of yours has ever come beneath my roof; no slanderer would dare to breathe your name in my presence," she answered, with a certain noble and gentle dignity peculiar to herself.

"Then, my cherished Laura, what is it? You spoke of having made a discovery, or rather a supposed discovery, that might—but never should—separate us forever. Now, dear Laura, what is the nature of this supposed discovery?"

"It concerns myself, Mr. Hastings; and possibly you, as you are interested in me." She paused and sighed.

"A discovery that concerns *you*, dear Laura? I need not repeat that it can *never*, whatever its nature may be, separate us, as you seem to think possible; but explain, my dear Laura. I long to share your secret," he said, drawing nearer to her; and taking her hand in his own.

"Ah! how can I ever inform you, Albert Hastings? Yet why do I hesitate? Whence comes this reluctance to speak of a misfortune for which I am in no degree responsible? Is it possible that, unconsciously, I cherish in my bosom a lurking pride of caste, that shrinks from acknowledging to-day the humiliating fact that must be made public to-morrow? Or do I doubt your constancy under the trying ordeal? I know not; but this weakness must be overcome," she said, speaking more to her own soul than to another.

He sat—now that his selfish fears were allayed—listening with attentive courtesy, while she continued:

"Mr. Hastings, whom do you take me to be? You believe me to be—as until last night I believed myself to be—Laura Etheridge, Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne."

"Assuredly," replied Mr. Hastings in surprise, privately asking himself, "What is this? Has she jilted me? Is she privately married to some earl or duke, who has raised her a step or two in the peerage, and covered her title with his own?" Her next words showed him his mistake.

"I am not so. No drop of the blood of Etheridge runs in my veins," she said, calmly.

"Laura! Lady Etheridge! In the name of all the saints in heaven, what do you mean?" he said, startled from all his imposed calmness by sheer astonishment, as though he thought she had suddenly gone mad.

"I mean just what I have said. I am no Etheridge. I am simply Laura Elmer, the daughter of the late game-keeper," she continued, with something like the seeming cruelty, but real mercy, wherewith the surgeon firmly uses the probing-knife.

"Laura! lady! madam! What is this—this accursed thing that you tell me? It cannot, it shall not be true," he cried, in great excitement.

"It is perfectly true. Albert Hastings, you have heard of such events as neglected infants, put out to nurse, being changed by the nurse, who, after some interval of time, foists upon the friends of her little charge, her own offspring."

He did not, he could not reply. He could only gaze upon her, with eyeballs strained outward as though they would burst their sockets.

"Mr. Hastings, the infant heiress of Swinburne Castle was just such a wronged child. Losing her mother when she was but a few weeks old, she was intrusted to a confidential but disaffected female servant. Alas! that I should have to speak thus of my poor mother. She was left in charge of this highly-trusted woman, while her widowed father went abroad to dissipate his grief. When, at the end of a few months, her father returned, and claimed his infant, this misguided woman, from motives of revenge for a bitter wrong, imposed upon him her own child, myself."

"Good heaven of heavens! Am I mad or dreaming!" ejaculated Albert Hastings.

"That is the question I asked myself twelve hours ago; but I am now calm and reasonable."

"It cannot be true. It is impossible. Who has abused your noble mind with such a ridiculous fabrication?"

"No one. The woman, full of remorse and believing herself to be dying, sent for me last night and made a full confession, bringing many proofs of the truth of her story."

"It is impossible, I repeat! It is impossible, I *insist*! The woman is either crazy or designing. She has told you an impudent and absurd falsehood! No strange child could ever be foisted upon a father as his own. It is utterly and forever impossible! Nature herself cries out against such a deception," exclaimed Mr. Hastings, trembling for the rich inheritance of his promised bride.

"Ah! Albert Hastings! you must know that such a fraud is not impossible, but that it has been more than once committed. And in this instance deception was temptingly easy. The infants that were changed were of the same age—three weeks old—and infants of that tender age all look alike. The father went away for many months, and when he returned it was as easy to give him one child as the other, so that the other was kept out of his sight."

"Good heavens! Lady Etheridge, you seem absolutely to be a partisan and an advocate of this otherwise preposterous claimant."

"I am a partisan of the truth, an advocate of the right, wherever I find them. The validity of this woman's state-

ment is palpable to me. Her earnest manner, believing herself to be near death, the *vraisemblance* of her story, and the fact that the young girl, whom I have seen, bears a strong resemblance to all the family portraits, while it is notorious that I resemble none of them."

"Lady Etheridge—for such you are, and so I shall call you—you cannot be so ignorant of the usages of law and society as to imagine that an obscure claimant, unsupported by stronger proof than that which has been advanced, and unaided by money or influence, can have any chance against the wealth, connection, and power of the present baroness."

"Mr. Hastings, I feel an inward conviction that that nurse's story is true, and that girl's claims are just, and I would die rather than use my position and power against her just rights."

"Lady Etheridge! my adored Laura! pause! consider! and if ever you honored with your priceless affections the humble man before you, leave this matter in my hands. In a few hours more I shall be your proud and happy husband—in a position to protect you. Leave it to me, then, to compromise with these people, and settle their preposterous claims," exclaimed Albert Hastings, earnestly.

While he spoke, she looked at him with a countenance in which surprise, incredulity and doubt gradually gave place to an expression of deep pain.

It needs a great crisis to bring out character. A smooth and plausible hypocrite may go on for years, "a living lie," in the midst of his most intimate friends, until some magic touchstone of circumstances reveals his true nature. Women are said to possess such fine instincts as to know by intuition the character of the man who is a suitor for their affections, and to shrink instinctively from the false and vicious. But this feminine attribute has been very much exaggerated in the description, for every day good girls—despite their fine instincts that should warn them—marry worthless men, as good men not unfrequently marry worthless women.

Lady Etheridge had been wooed and won by, perhaps, the most heartless, selfish, and unprincipled man of his time. No fine instinct of her noble and confiding nature had warned her

that he was a villain. It remained for the trial of a great crisis to test his character. And now this test was applied, and his true nature was beginning to reveal itself. He was showing himself willing to use the advantages of wealth, connection and power to crush the just claims of a poor, friendless and helpless claimant; or else to take advantage of the poverty, friendlessness, and helplessness of the claimant, to buy up her right and force her to silence.

No wonder that she regarded him with a face in which astonishment, doubt, and incredulity gradually changed to an expression of deep pain.

"You consent to this, Lady Etheridge. You will intrust this matter to me, to be arranged after I shall have become your husband."

"Nay; pardon me, Mr. Hastings. I must become your wife in my true colors. I must resign my rank and title, too long wrongfully, though most ignorantly, held. The hand I give you must be clean and honest, holding no possession to which it has no right," replied the lady, sadly, but firmly.

"Laura Etheridge," said Mr. Hastings, coldly, "your sympathies and affections appear to me to side with any rather than with me. You seem willing to resign, with a culpable levity, a title, rank and fortune, as precious to me as they should be to yourself."

"Nay; not so, Albert. I, too, have greatly valued the advantages of a position that I so long believed to be mine, and, if I resign them now, it is because I cannot keep them and keep honor as well. Oh, Albert Hastings! I was this morning stripped of name and title, rank and wealth. I stand before you as poor as the poorest cottage-girl in our valley, having but one treasure, the priceless treasure of my life's unsullied honor! Ah! tempt me not to barter it for Swinburne Castle and barony, with all their appurtenances," she pleaded, fervently, clasping her hands, and gazing appealingly into his face.

"Tut, tut! my dearest Laura; you talk like a fanatic. Now, is there a man or woman living who would yield up a possession like the barony and castle of Swinburne without trying to crush, or compromise with, or buy up the pretensions of their opponents?"

"Yes," she answered, gravely and sweetly. "There is such a woman; and I—bereft of every thing but honor—am she; and there is, I hope, such a man, and you are the one."

"Not I, by my soul, Lady Etheridge! I beg your pardon, my adored Laura; but you shall not impoverish yourself, or discrown your noble brow of the coronet it so well becomes. Fortunately, your generous confidence invested me with the possession of your landed estate and personal property by deed of gift. I shall deem it right to hold and defend the same against every claimant. More fortunately still, I have your promise to become my wife. For your own good now, sweet one, I shall hold you to that promise. And when once you have vowed love, honor, and obedience to me, though I shall always remain your most devoted slave, yet in one particular I shall exact, for your own benefit, the performance of your own vow of obedience. I shall require you to be perfectly passive in this matter, and leave the settling of these people to me. Sweet Laura! it is near the hour that we should be at the church, and I long to call you mine," said Mr. Hastings, rising. She also arose, saying—

"Albert Hastings, do not be deceived. I shall perform all my promises and vows, if, under the circumstances, you continue to wish it; but in that you will not marry Lady Etheridge of Swinburne, but plain Laura Elmer, the game-keeper's daughter; while Rose, the reputed child of the village laundress, is the true Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne!"

"Rose! Rose Elmer! is *she* the party?" exclaimed Mr. Hastings, falling back several paces, and gazing in astonishment upon his betrothed.

"Yes; gentle Rose, miscalled Elmer, is the party. Do you know her?"

"Mrs. Elmer is my laundress. But you never told me that they were the parties!"

"It was inadvertence. I was not aware that I had not named them," said the lady, while her betrothed turned and walked up and down the floor, murmuring within himself—

"Rose, Rose Elmer, Baroness Etheridge! It may turn out so! it may! and if it does——" Here he stole a look at one or two of the family portraits. "And she is wondrously

like the family! 'a softened image' of those grim old Barons! Strange, I never noticed the likeness before! It is certainly very striking! And now, if I should marry for her fortune this Laura whom I do not love, and afterwards discover that Swinburne belongs to Rose, whom I do love—why, what a fool I shall have proved myself! I must not commit myself! I must gain time to see how this will end. I am sure of either of the women—that's a comfort—and I shall marry the Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne, whichever that shall prove to be."

Here he stole a look at Laura.

She was still seated at the table, with her elbows resting on its top, her noble brow supported by her hand, and her large, earnest eyes cast down as in troubled thought. She was ruminating, probably, over the strange phases of her lover's character, as brought out by the crisis.

She raised her eyes to meet his perplexed glance.

"Lady Etheridge," he artfully began, "I think you are right. As we cannot agree upon the proper course to be pursued in this matter of the new claim, as you differ widely from me, it is best, perhaps, that I should leave your conscience untrammelled in this action."

"Oh, Albert Hastings, how much I thank you!" she exclaimed, fervently, dismissing her late distressing doubt as to his integrity of purpose, and cordially holding out her hand to him.

He took it somewhat coldly, pressed it slightly, dropped it, and continued:

"And in order to leave you a moral free agent to act as you please in this affair, it is necessary that I make the great sacrifice of offering to defer our marriage-day until this matter is finally settled."

She raised her eyes to his with one long, wistful gaze, as though she would have read his soul. And she did read it, and as she saw the dark characters of selfishness and duplicity inscribed therein, her eloquent countenance went through all the changes of astonishment, wonder, doubt and conviction, settling at last into an expression of bitter disappointment, shame, and pain—for him, not for herself—for him, that he should have fallen so far below her estimate of his character.

She had no word of vain reproach for him. She understood at once his whole policy and in that policy she learned his nature. He had endeavored to persuade her to use her power to crush or buy up a claim, priceless as it was just, and failing to do so, he had determined to postpone their marriage, and wait the issue of the contested claim—could any one doubt with what final purpose?

"You do not answer me, Lady Etheridge! Perhaps the proposition is distasteful to you?" he said, indulging himself in a slight touch of irony.

"On the contrary, I thank you for making it, Mr. Hastings. It relieves me for the present, and very much simplifies my course of action," she calmly replied.

"Oh, perdition! I do not wish to break with her finally and entirely. I wish to have it in my power to marry her, should she be confirmed in her present position, which I really think the probable termination of this affair. I must soothe her, and make her understand that our marriage is deferred, not broken off. Nor shall it be broken off unless she is positively proved to be the laundress's daughter," thought Albert Hastings. Then, addressing his betrothed, he said:

"My dearest Laura, you will see that my proposal leaves you free to act as you please in this affair of the contested inheritance, but it does not release you from your marriage engagement, to which, fairest lady, I must still hold you."

She was very pale and firm as she replied—

"Understand me, Albert Hastings. In this great crisis in my life, you propose to defer our marriage. I accept your proposition, and defer our union forever. But you wish to wait the issue of what you consider a doubtful case. I can save you time and trouble, by telling you at once what that issue will be. Rose Elmer will be declared Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne. Mr. Hastings, you are free from this moment forever."

"But, Lady Etheridge! Laura! I cannot and will not consent to your breaking with me in this manner. I only wished to postpone our marriage until——"

"You should know whether I should be confirmed in my inheritance of the title and estates of Swinburne. Pardon

me, Albert Hastings; but poor as I have grown within the last few hours, I cannot keep myself attendant upon your pleasure, to be accepted or rejected. You are free, Albert Hastings! so am I! Farewell! The Lord knows, I wish you a better heart and a nobler spirit! Once more, farewell," she said, rising to leave the room.

He seized her hand and forced her to sit down, while, with all the impassioned eloquence of his gifted but perfidious mind he besought her to reconsider her decision—to give him time.

"To what end? To find myself rejected at last, when Rose Elmer shall have been declared to be Lady Etheridge? Oh! Albert Hastings, spare me that humiliation!"

"Laura, you will be sorry for this!" he cried, passionately.

"I know it. I do not pretend to strength, or hardness, or coldness that does not belong to me. I shall be sorry for—for this loss of love. I am sorry even now; but my sorrow is, and shall be, a thing between myself and my Creator. Once more I wish you well, Mr. Hastings. Good-bye."

And before he could again prevent her, she bowed and left the room.

Mr. Albert Hastings made a gesture of fierce impatience, and began walking rapidly up and down the floor, exclaiming—

"Here is a pretty dilemma! If she should, contrary to her expectations, be confirmed in her possessions? But I must try to prevent that. Her final and entire rejection of me has at least decided my course. Rose Elmer's prospects look well. Now, then, I shall embrace the cause of Rose Elmer. I shall hasten to her side, and persuade her to marry me, before she suspects her good fortune; and then I shall devote time, money, and interest to the establishment of her rights."

And so saying, Albert Hastings left the castle, leaving to Lady Etheridge the task of explaining to her guardian the reason why their marriage was broken off.

On leaving the castle grounds he took the road to the village, and bent his steps to seek Rose Elmer

CHAPTER VI.

THE LAST TRIAL.

There is a calm where grief o'erflows,
A refuge from the worst of woes;
It comes when pleasure's dream is o'er,
And hope, the charmer, charms no more.
'Tis where the heart is wrung till dry, —
And not a tear bedews the eye.
'Tis where we see the tranquil gaze,
While not a smile the lip betrays.—*Moore.*

LADY ETHERIDGE—we will continue to call her by this familiar name until she is legally deprived of it—Lady Etheridge stood where Mr. Hastings had left her, buried in thought, until she was aroused by the sudden recollection that Colonel Hastings was awaiting her in the crimson drawing-room.

Then, calmly and majestically, she left the library, crossed the spacious hall, and entered the presence of her guardian.

She found him reclining indolently in a lounge chair; but on seeing her enter, he arose and came forward to meet her, with some gay salutation upon his lips, when the marble whiteness of her face and the stern rigidity of her features startled him.

“Good Heaven, Lady Etheridge, what has happened?” he exclaimed, taking her hand, and putting her into an easy-chair.

“The marriage intended between Mr. Hastings and myself is broken off by mutual consent,” replied the lady, quietly.

“The marriage between yourself and Albert Hastings broken off, Lady Etheridge! You astound me! And at the last moment, too! It cannot be so! It is madness! just madness! It cannot be so! It must not—shall not be so! Some absurd lover’s quarrel, I suppose! It must be made up immediately! Where is Albert? He will make every apology, every concession, I am sure! Where is he? I will bring him to your feet immediately! Good heaven, there is no time to be lost either!” exclaimed Colonel Hastings in con-

sternation and eager impatience to find his son, as he hastened to the door.

"Stay," said Lady Etheridge. "This is no lover's quarrel, as you seem to think. Am I a woman likely to be engaged in such a vain matter? No; between Mr. Hastings and myself there has been nothing so childish. It is a far graver matter."

"In the name of all the demons then, girl, what is it? I beg your pardon, Lady Etheridge, I am an old man, lately your guardian, and am apt to forget myself when provoked. But what is the matter?"

"I have, within the last few hours made a discovery of which I felt in honor bound to inform Mr. Hastings, leaving it to his discretion, under the new circumstances, to complete or not our marriage engagement. He proposes a middle course—to postpone our wedding and wait for events. I could not accept his proposal, and so, as I told you, our marriage engagement has been broken off by mutual consent."

"A discovery! What discovery can be so important as to cause the postponement or annulment of your betrothal, even at the last moment! Lady Etheridge, as your oldest friend and your late guardian, I should have been the first to be informed of this difficulty," said Colonel Hastings, in an excess of agitation, that scarcely seemed justified, even by the grave importance of a broken marriage.

"I deemed my affianced husband to be the proper person to be first advised of a discovery that so deeply affected my circumstances, and his interests."

"In heaven's name, Lady Etheridge, what is the nature of this discovery?" inquired Colonel Hastings, moving about restlessly, and scarcely able to restrain his agitation.

"It is simply that I, called Laura Etheridge, am not the heiress of Swinburne!"

The effect this announcement had upon Colonel Hastings could scarcely be explained as astonishment, doubt, or disappointment. It seemed rather the consternation, terror, and dismay of detected guilt. He dropped into a chair, wiped the cold drops of perspiration from his blanched face, made several ineffectual attempts to speak, and then gasped forth:

"For heaven's sake, tell me! How did the existence of this other heir come to your knowledge?"

"By the confession of the nurse, to whom was confided the care of the infant heiress of Swinburne, and who, alas! was tempted to betray her trust, and palm off upon the wifeless baron her own child as his daughter."

"What!" exclaimed Colonel Hastings, in perplexity, but losing a portion of the abject terror that had lately and unaccountably shaken him.

"It is a sad story for me to tell! It compels my tongue to the unkind task of disinheriting myself, and to the harder and more cruel one of criminating my mother."

"Your mother! a purer and holier woman never lived than your mother!" exclaimed the old man.

"A purer and holier woman than the late Baroness Etheridge never lived, you would say, and I can well believe it; but she was not my mother."

"Tah! tah! tah! my dear girl; your head is turned with reading romances," exclaimed Colonel Hastings, in a sort of cheerful tone, for his courage and spirits were rapidly returning.

"I wish that you could convince me of that; but permit me to tell you all the circumstances, from that moment, yesterday, at dusk, that I was summoned to the bedside of Mrs. Elmer, to the present, and then you will be better able to judge of the truth of the statement."

"Go on, my dear Laura; but I warn you that I prepare myself to listen only to a romance," said Colonel Hastings, in a gay voice, for he had quite recovered his self-possession.

Lady Etheridge commenced and narrated the whole story as she had received it from the nurse.

Colonel Hastings, as he listened, grew graver and graver, and when she had concluded, he paused a long time in deep thought, and then said:

"This is a much more serious matter than I had imagined, Lady Etheridge. This newly sprung-up claimant, supported by the dying declaration of the nurse Magdalene, is more terrible than we like. What do you think of it, Lady Etheridge!"

"I think the nurse's story, told upon what she supposes to be her death-bed, and supported by the strongest corroborative evidence as it is—to be undeniably true. And for myself, I shall make no opposition to the claims of the rightful heiress."

"Lady Etheridge! you amaze me! You absolutely speak as an advocate for your opponent."

"I speak as an advocate of truth."

"But what corroborative evidence is there for the truth of this woman's story—dying declaration though she may consider it to be?"

"Abundant evidence. Do *you*, Colonel Hastings, imagine that I, called the last Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne, would resign the inheritance of this old and vast estate, did I not consider the evidence of the new claimant's right to be undeniable? Never!"

"But this corroborative evidence. What is it?"

"This. First, that there are scores of persons who can prove that the infant heiress of Swinburne was confided to the care of Magdalene Elmer, the game-keeper's widow. Secondly, that there are hundreds who can prove that at that time Magdalene Elmer had a child of her own, of the same age as her nursling. Thirdly, the same witnesses can prove that these two babes remained in the exclusive charge of Magdalene Elmer from the day of their birth to that upon which both were six months old. That then one of them was given up to the baron as his heiress. The child imposed upon the baron has no lineament of the Etheridge family, but strongly resembles the plebeian Elmers; while the true heiress, suppressed by the nurse, bears no resemblance to her foster mother, but is, in every respect, 'a softened image' of the old Baron Etheridge. Believe me, Colonel Hastings, the claims of this young maiden are just. I feel within my heart a strong conviction that they are so."

"Lady Etheridge, I know you well enough to be sure that if once you suppose the claims of another to be just, however opposed to your own interests those claims may be, you will at once admit them. I must see this woman, and, as a magistrate, I must take her statement officially, upon oath; and, as

you say—awkward as it may be—your marriage with my son must be postponed.”

“Our engagement, Colonel Hastings, must be annulled,” said Lady Etheridge, with gentle dignity.

“Well, well. We will talk of that at some future time. Meanwhile, we will direct good Mrs. Montgomery to explain to our friends that, from unforeseen circumstances, the marriage is necessarily put off, and we will go together to Mrs. Elmer’s cottage, where I will cross-examine her,” said the Colonel, rising and touching the bell.

A footman answered the summons.

“Desire Mrs. Montgomery to come hither, and then order the horses to be put to the close carriage, and brought round immediately,” said Colonel Hastings.

The man bowed and retired; and in a few moments the door opened, and a tall, dignified, elderly lady, attired in a black satin dress and white lace turban, entered the room.

“Good-morning, Mrs. Montgomery. We have ventured to request your presence here upon rather a sorrowful occasion. We have just received intelligence that an old and intimate friend of our family is lying at the point of death. This necessitates a temporary postponement of the marriage, as Lady Etheridge and myself must immediately repair to the death-bed of our friend. You will, therefore, Mrs. Montgomery, be so good as to take upon yourself the task of explaining to those friends who intend to honor our breakfast, the sad reason why our festivity is deferred,” said Colonel Hastings.

To say that Mrs. Montgomery was thunderstruck at this announcement would give the reader but a faint idea of its effect upon her. She was stricken dumb for at least two minutes; but on recovering her speech she set her tongue at work, “to make fast atonement for its first delay.” Colonel Hastings, however, at once cut her short, by observing that Lady Etheridge had not a moment to spare, as Death was no respecter of persons, and would not wait for the mightiest on earth. And then, with the stately courtesy of the olden time, he conducted his ward to the door of her dressing-room.

And in half-an-hour afterwards, Colonel Hastings and Lady Etheridge were rolling along in the close carriage on their way to the house of the laundress.

Upon reaching the narrow, dusty street, and the cottage occupied by the poor woman, Colonel Hastings put a question to Lady Etheridge :

“ Does this young girl—this Miss Rose Elmer—know any thing of the claim set up in her favor ?”

“ I think not. Up to this morning she certainly did not. Whether she has since been informed, I do not know. If she is with my mother, as I suppose she is, we can easily judge by her countenance when we meet her.”

“ If she does not yet know, it will be best for all concerned that she should not be told just yet, or until we have a little more light on the subject.”

“ Why ?” inquired the frank and straightforward Lady Etheridge.

“ Because, to inform her thus prematurely would put you in a false position.”

“ Do not think of my feelings ; think of the girl’s rights.”

“ Well, then, in that view of the case, it would be cruel at this uncertain stage of affairs to raise in her simple bosom visions of ambition that may never be realized. It would be enough, in fact, to turn the poor girl’s brain.”

Lady Etheridge did not at once reply ; she could not at first decide upon the propriety or impropriety of what the colonel advised. At last she said :

“ You may be right, Colonel Hastings. I cannot trust to my own judgment in a case where I am so deeply interested. But one thing I beseech of you—do not urge me to hold my present position an hour longer than may be necessary ; for I feel within myself a strong conviction that the claims set up for that young girl are just.”

“ We will see that, Lady Etheridge. I must converse with this woman, submit her for examination to a physician, to decide upon the soundness of her mind, and then take her statement upon oath,” replied Colonel Hastings, as the carriage stopped.

They alighted and entered the house.

The sick woman lay where Lady Etheridge had left her some hours before. She was attended by Rose and a neighbor who watched with her

The eyes of the visitors turned first upon Rose a glance of inquiry, to see whether as yet she knew or suspected the possible great fortune in store for her.

But no; that drooping form, pale face, and those tearful eyes spoke of any thing rather than of pleasure and unexpected triumph.

Laura and Colonel Hastings exchanged a look which said plainly, "She knows nothing."

Laura then advanced to greet the maiden, who was about respectfully to courtesy to the baroness, who immediately presented her to Colonel Hastings. And it must be admitted that the cunning old courtier bowed to the poor cottage-girl with some forecasting respect due to the possible future Lady Etheridge of Swinburne.

The neighbor arose, made her obeisance, and gave way to the distinguished visitors.

As Laura took the place by the head of the bed, the sleeping woman awoke, and, seeing her, said:

"Ah, you have returned, as you promised! I knew you would. Laura! Laura! take my hand, my child. Forget your past grandeur, or regard it only as a brilliant dream, and take my hand, my child. I will not ask it long. Are we alone?"

"No, mother; Rose is here, and one of your neighbors."

"Send them away."

This short conversation was carried on in a very low voice unheard by any one in the room.

Laura arose and spoke to Rose and to the neighbor, both of whom immediately left the house. She then returned to the bedside of the sick woman, who again eagerly clasped and held her hand, saying:

"Oh, Laura! Laura! do not feel coldly towards me. Let me have the comfort of my child's affection in the last few hours of my life. Oh, Laura! Laura! all these years my heart has yearned to you with such a mighty, unquenchable thirst for your presence and your love; and when I have heard all the people praise the goodness, and wisdom, and bounty of Lady Etheridge, I have said to myself, 'That is my daughter. No haughty, cold-blooded and selfish Etheridge

ever was good, wise, or bountiful. It is because she is my daughter !' and when I have seen you passing through the village in state and grandeur, and joy, I have not dared to linger and gaze upon your form, lest I should rush out and catch you to my bosom. Do not be cold to me now ; indeed, it would break my heart, and cut short even the few hours I have to live. Do not shrink from me now, my only child !" pleaded the woman, in a voice of such deep sorrow that Lady Etheridge bent down and tenderly kissed her, saying :

" I do not, mother. I have come to stay with you till the last."

" Oh, thank you, Laura !" cried the wretched woman, pressing her hand with spasmodic haste. " And you forgive me ?"

" Forgive you ! for what injury, poor mother ?"

" For hurling you down from rank, and wealth, and love, to poverty, want, and desolation."

" In depriving me of those possessions you take from me that to which I have no right. It is an act of justice ; and, dear mother, it must be completed in due form, so as to be available to her who has the right to all those advantages which I must resign."

" Laura, I cannot be at peace until you say that you forgive me. I feel that I have cruelly wronged you, in permitting you to grow up in the false position of a lady of rank and fortune, followed, courted, idolized as such, only to feel more bitterly the curse of poverty, scorn, and desertion ; for, Laura, the world abandons the unfortunate. The prosperous have flatterers, friends, and lovers to share their prosperity ; the wretched have nothing but their wretchedness. Laura, this is so—even with you, my child. This was to have been your wedding-day ; but the hour is passed, the marriage is broken off, the lover is yours no longer. He has forsaken you in your adversity. Is this not so, Laura ?" demanded the woman, with sudden energy.

" The marriage is broken off, dear mother. Speak no more of this, I do implore you !"

" I have caused you that suffering, my poor child. Laura, now can you forgive me ? or how can I die without your forgiveness ?"

"Poor mother! Forgiveness is a profane word to pass from child to parent."

"Yet I cannot rest without it, Laura."

"Then take it, with all my heart. If you think that you have injured me, take my forgiveness, as freely and as perfectly as I hope for that of heaven!"

"I thank and bless you, oh, my child!"

"But, mother, there is another for whom you must care."

"Yes, Rose. Alas! Whom have I wronged most, you or her? It is hard to tell. And yet I have fondly loved both; you, because you were my own; *her*, because she was my foster-child and my constant companion. Yes, and because she was so good. Where she got her goodness from I do not know. Certainly not from the Etheridges; probably from her mother's family."

"But you must not judge all the Etheridges from your sad experience of one or two. And now, poor mother, a trial awaits you, which I would willingly spare you, if I could do so with justice to another. But be strong and patient; it shall be the last trial to which you shall be subjected. It will be but short, and when it is over I will remain with you as long as you live, and try to perform towards you all the duties of a daughter."

"Give me the *love* of one, my child. I need it greatly. And now what is it you would have me do, Laura?"

"The statement that you made to me last night, to be of any avail to the true heiress of Swinburne, must be put into writing, sworn to, signed, and duly witnessed in the presence of a magistrate. Also, it is needful that you submit to an examination by a physician, who will duly testify that you are of sound mind when you execute the document."

"I will do all that you wish me, Laura. Let the proper person be brought hither. The sooner the better."

Laura beckoned Colonel Hastings, who had retired to the farther end of the room, out of hearing of this conversation.

When he came to the bedside, she presented him to the dying woman, saying—

"Here, mother, is my late guardian, Colonel Hastings, who is a magistrate, and who will take all the necessary proceedings, if you will authorize him."

"Yes; certainly. I will be very thankful, sir, if you will send for a physician and a lawyer, and any one else whom you may think proper to summon, for the purpose of confirming and insuring the validity of the statement that I wish to make," said Mrs. Elmer.

Colonel Hastings growled an inaudible reply, for he was very much perplexed and dissatisfied; and went out, entered the carriage, and drove off to bring the proper parties.

In half an hour he returned with them.

I will not weary my reader with the details of the formal proceedings that occupied the next two or three hours, and that confirmed the validity of the dying woman's statement. The whole business was conducted in a manner at once legal and confidential. No form was omitted that could go to confirm the evidence; yet, each member of the party stood strictly pledged to the others to keep the secret until proper proceedings could be taken upon it. Immediately after the signing and witnessing of the document all left the cottage, with the exception of Colonel Hastings and Laura, who remained by the bedside of the patient, who had sunk into a sleep of utter exhaustion.

"Well, Lady Etheridge. However this may eventually result, whoever may be declared the true heiress, of this you may rest assured, that, 'possession being nine points of the law,' it must, in any case, be months, if not years, before you can be compelled to lay down your title, or give up your estate, or leave your home at the castle."

"Colonel Hastings, I do not believe that there is one candid person in the world who could witness what we have witnessed to-day, and not feel convinced of the truth of my mother's statement, and the rights of Rose to the title and estates of Etheridge of Swinburne. I shall not wait to be just for the tardy permission of the law. I here and now solemnly resign in favor of the new claimant all right and title that I may be supposed to have to the barony and estates of Swinburne. This is my final resolve. Call me, therefore, no longer Lady Etheridge, but, if you are kind, call me, as you did in my happy childhood, Laura, for that name is mine yet."

"Well, then, my dear Laura, this is unprecedented conduct on your part. You will, perhaps, take a different view of it in a day or so; in the meantime, let us summon some one to watch by this woman, and let us return to the castle."

"No; I shall never return to the castle again. My duty is here, by the bedside of my dying mother."

"But, my dear Laura! how can you stay in this miserable abode? You have not even come prepared to do so."

"The last thing you said is partly true. I am not well prepared to stay. I will therefore beg you, on your return to the castle, to direct my woman to pack up my wardrobe—not the bridal one—and forward it to me here. It is the last service I shall ask her to perform. As for my jewelry, books, pictures, statues, vases, and articles of *vertu*, collected in Italy and Greece, I must leave them to the new baroness. They were purchased from the resources of the estate, and even if this had not been so, they are the least as well as the most that I can offer in repayment for all that I have expended of hers."

"But, my dear Laura, this is fanaticism, sheer fanaticism! You are not now in a condition to judge what you should do! You are unnerved by this sudden shock. You have spent the night in watching. You need repose and cool reflection before venturing to act in this affair. Let me entreat you to return home, retire to your chamber, and take a few hours sleep. You will then be in a better condition to think and to act."

"I thank you, Colonel Hastings; but my mind is clear enough and strong enough, even now, to know right from wrong. I repeat that, after witnessing what we have witnessed, neither you nor I can have any doubt as to who is the true heiress of Swinburne. Under these circumstances, I at once resign whatever right or title I may have been supposed to have to the barony and castle. To do this promptly, and at once, is the only atonement I can make for having unwittingly kept the true heiress so long out of her rights."

"Well, Laura, I perceive it is useless to combat your resolution at present, though I deem it a most injudicious one." And so saying, Colonel Hastings rose to bid her good-day.

After the departure of the colonel, Laura remained seated alone by the bedside of her mother. Notwithstanding the tremendous shock of this terrible revolution of her fortune, in the midst of the storm and chaos of its attendant circumstances—in the deep humiliation of her sudden fall from rank, wealth, and power, to degradation, want, and helplessness—in the sharp pain of wounded affections from the desertion of her lover, Laura Elmer preserved the noble calmness of her soul! And in all the confusion of misfortune, passion, and grief, she saw the line of duty clearly, and followed it bravely! And as she sat there, no longer Baroness Etheridge, of Swinburne, but simply Laura Elmer, no one could have gazed upon her pure, calm, noble countenance, and not deemed

“Her uncrowned *womanhood* to be the royal thing.”

CHAPTER VII.

ROSE.

Oh! grief beyond all griefs, when fate
First leaves the young heart desolate
In the wide world, without that only tie,
For which it loved to live, or feared to die.—*Moore.*

WHEN Rose Elmer left her mother's cottage, it must be remembered that she had no knowledge or suspicion of the exalted fortunes in prospect for her. Her heart was filled with grief and despair—grief for her supposed mother's failing mind and body, and despair at the discovered falsehood and treachery of her lover. For him whom she had known only as William Lovel, her pure affection, honor, and trust, had amounted to real faith and worship. With the heathenish idolatry of a young, warm heart, she had adored him as a god. And now to find this idol of her adoration a traitor of the deepest dye, who could now woo her under false pretences and an assumed name, and who, even on his eve of

marriage with Lady Etheridge, could coolly plot her own ruin, so wrung her heart with anguish, and distracted her brain with wonder, that her whole nature seemed beaten about between madness and death, as a storm-tossed ship between wind and wave.

In this mood of mind she left the cottage, and after parting with her neighbor at the door of the latter, she walked listlessly down the narrow street, intending to seek the hills. She had proceeded but a little way beyond the outskirts of the town, and had sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree to rest for a while, when she heard a familiar footstep approach, and, looking up, she saw Albert Hastings standing before her.

She started up with the intention of hastening away, when he caught her hand, replaced her on her seat, and smilingly said—

“What, my sweet Rose! you broke your appointment with me last evening, and now, on seeing me approach, you try to run away. How is that, sweet Rose?”

“When I made that appointment yesterday morning, thought that I was making it with my own betrothed lover, William Lovel, and not with the affianced husband of Lady Etheridge, Mr. Hastings,” replied Rose, with more severity upon her young brow than any one would have supposed her capable of showing.

“Mr. Hastings! Lady Etheridge! What is it you mean, Rose? Some one has been slandering me to you.”

“No, Mr. Hastings. Thank heaven that no one on earth knows our acquaintance except your worthy friend and valet, Levere. Thank heaven that none else in this world knows the extent of your falsehood and my folly!”

“Rose, what, in heaven’s name, is the meaning of this? It seems to me that to-day I have fallen into a train of strange adventures.”

“Not so strange either as those you had marked out for yourself when you purposed, in the same day, to marry a peeress and ruin a peasant. Oh! against which of the two did you meditate the blackest treachery? Against the unloved lady whom you were about to lead to the altar, or the ill-loved cottager, whom you were alluring to destruction?”

Good heaven ! what blackness of wickedness ! Stand out of my way, sir, and let me pass. Your presence darkens the very sunshine to me !" exclaimed the maiden, with a horror so real that it could not have been concealed.

"Rose ! I have twice asked you what is the meaning of this attack. I have a right to an answer."

"You shall have it, Mr. Hastings. But first, perhaps, you will explain to me how it is, that on this, your wedding-day, and hour, you are here questioning me, instead of being at the church with Lady Etheridge ?"

He saw, by her manner and her expression, that she knew too much for him to attempt to carry on the deception. He felt no other course was possible for him but to tell the truth, and defend his conduct as best he might. He said :

"Rose, it is true that many months before I knew you and love, partly to please my father, who desired the marriage, and partly to please the lady who conferred upon me the honor of her preference, I contracted myself to Laura Etheridge, without a particle of love on my side entering into the affair. Afterwards I saw *you*, Rose of the world, and loved you, the first and only woman I ever *did* love, the last and only woman I ever shall love. I could not forego the pleasure of seeking your dear presence, and beseeching your love. If I approached you under an assumed name, it was a lover's stratagem, and, as such, you will forgive me. If I sought to make you mine upon unequal terms, it was a lover's extravagance, and, as such, you may pardon it. I love you, Rose, with a whole and undivided heart. In proof of which, I have this day done what I should have done months ago. I have broken with Lady Etheridge, and I have come hither to throw myself upon your mercy, to beg pardon for all the wrongs done or meditated against you, to lay my heart, hand, and fortune at your beloved feet, and to beg you to be my wife. Rose, I am at your feet. Will you forgive me ? Will you accept my hand, and be my beloved wife ?" he supplicated, sinking upon one knee, and taking her hand.

She snatched it from him and shrunk away, exclaiming :

"You have broken with Lady Etheridge ! Double traitor ! false to me ! False to her ! Who shall trust you ?"

"Rose! Rose! I do not merit these bitter reproaches from you—not from you! To you, at least, I have been true!"

"But false to her! false to that noble lady who gave you all she possessed, and, above all, her whole heart's rich love! Ah! do you think, sir, that I admire treachery any more, because another is to suffer by it rather than myself? Shall I thank you, because you have turned traitor to Lady Etheridge, rather than to me? No! no! no! no! a thousand times no! I spurn the faithless heart! Go! leave me, Mr. Hastings! Your presence infects the very air I breathe!"

"Rose! Rose! Why this fierce indignation against one who adores you? Why do you continue to strike one who loves you too tenderly to retort? If for a time I vacillated between the lady who had my promise and the maiden who possessed my heart; if, finally, I broke with the lady and decided for the maiden, was *that* so great a crime? If so, you, at least, Rose, who profit by it, should not reproach me with it," said Albert Hastings, bitterly.

"I profit by your treachery! I pick up your broken faith, and wear it as a trophy! Never! Know me better, Mr. Hastings."

"Rose, you are very cruel."

"Listen to me once more, and for the last time, and you will understand why you and I must speak no more on earth. Yesterday afternoon you met me, breathing vows of sincere, undivided, undying love!"

"Which were true, Rose! as true as heaven!"

"*They were?* Well, so I believed them to be, and so I, hoping in a fool's paradise, left you. Well, when I reached home, my mother, very unexpectedly on my part, despatched me to the castle to request Lady Etheridge to come to see her. On reaching the castle I was shown to the library, where I found the lady sitting with documents before her, and with her noble face beaming with happiness and benedictions, as though she were anticipating the arrival of some one upon whom she was about to bestow some new token of her love—some unexampled good. In a word, Mr. Hastings, this noble and generous lady was expecting her betrothed husband, upon whom she was about to bestow in advance her

whole vast landed estate. I had scarcely time to deliver my message and to gain her consent to come to my mother, when *your* name was announced. The dear lady, who had nothing to conceal, did not send me from the room, but bade me retire to the bay-window seat, and amuse myself with some prints until she should be at liberty to go with me. I obeyed her, and in another moment, your name, your *true* name, and not the false one by which I had known you, was announced, and you entered the room. I heard your voice, and recognizing it, started and turned around to assure myself that my ears had not deceived me. No; there *you* stood, breathing to *her* the same vows of sincere, undivided, undying love, that you had just three hours before breathed to me! And there *she* stood, noble lady! with all her loyal soul beaming from her fine face, believing your words that fell from your false tongue, just as I believed you three hours before! I took all this in at one amazed glance, and then—I am ashamed to confess it, it was a miserable weakness on my part—you were not worthy of so much emotion—but, overcome by the sudden shock, I fainted away. When I recovered, I found myself supported in the arms of Lady Etheridge. You were gone, and the air was sweeter for your absence!”

“And you had an explanation with Lady Etheridge?” exclaimed Mr. Hastings, suddenly.

“No; the noble lady attributed my fainting to a long walk and a long fast, and I had not the courage to undeceive her. When by her compassionate attentions she had quite restored me, she looked so happy and so confident in her affections that I had not the heart to trouble her. I told her nothing about you. I was wrong. I should have unmasked you, then and there, regardless of the pain I gave her, thinking only of the lasting misery from which I saved her. It was very wrong not to have done so. That was another weakness of which I would not again be guilty. Indeed, I think all girlish weakness has departed from me forever. A little while ago, I was like a ship tossed in a storm; it seemed to me that I should die or go mad; it was the violent death throes of a love that would not survive me. It is all over now, and I am calm, though not yet very strong.”

"Oh, Rose! do not say so. I have borne all your reproaches. I have acknowledged my sin. Do not discard me! it would kill me!" exclaimed Albert Hastings, passionately.

"And I do not care if it does," replied Rose, slowly and calmly. "Your first troth was plighted to Lady Etheridge, to her it was alone due. To her you have been false; but to her I will be so true, that I will spurn the traitor heart you take from her to offer to me. I will be true to my sister woman. Why, indeed, should not women be true to each other, since men are so false to them? Well, out of the bitterness of my late experience I learn this wisdom, and record this vow: I, whose footsteps have strayed so near the precipice over which so many, more unfortunate than myself, have fallen—I will henceforth take part with my sister woman, whether peeress or peasant, whether honored or scorned, however weak, unhappy, fallen, and degraded she may be, I will always defend my sister woman, with all my might, against the world, the flesh, and the demon, if need be. So, may the Saviour of us all defend me at my greatest need. Take yourself out of my way, and let me pass, Mr. Hastings."

"And will you not forgive me, Rose?"

"If ever the Lord gives me grace enough I may. I cannot yet."

"Will you not wish me well, then? She with whom, for your sake I broke faith, *she* wished me well."

"She is the Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne, a peeress of the realm, a noble lady. Yet she has a meeker heart than I, the cottage girl, possess. I cannot so easily forgive. We waste time. Let me pass." And Rose, putting out her white arms, seemed to sweep him aside, while, with the air of a young princess, she passed on her way.

"She is a true Etheridge of Swinburne! Devoted to her friends! Relentless to her foes! She is very angry with me now. I must be very patient, forbearing and hopeful to manage this case; for marry her I will, despite of earth and Hades!" said Albert Hastings to himself, as he took his way back to the castle, where he had to meet his father at dinner

CHAPTER VIII.

VILLANOUS COUNSEL.

For close design and crooked counsel fit;
Sagacious, bold, and truculent of wit,
Restless, ambitious, subtle, sly, and base,
In power despotic—slavish in disgrace.—*Dryden*

THE father and son met at dinner. Mrs. Montgomery was at the head of the table. The good lady was full of anxious inquiries as to the condition of that dying friend to whom Lady Etheridge had been so inopportunately summoned.

"And, by the way, Colonel, you never informed me of the name of the person, which indeed I was too much flurried at the time to ask," said the matron.

"It was a Mrs. Elmer, a very old friend of the family, now residing in the neighborhood," replied Colonel Hastings, evasively. And as Mrs. Montgomery had never heard this name, she could form no idea of the identity of the individual alluded to.

"Dear me; and how is the poor lady by this time? really dying, do you think?"

"She is, at least, very ill; and Lady Etheridge kindly remains by her side."

"Just like dear Laura. But, dear me, what a time I have had with the visitors that were invited to the breakfast. Meeting carriage-load after carriage-load, and sending them off with the same tale—Lady Etheridge called suddenly to the death-bed of a dear friend. And then the condolences I had to hear; and the inquiries I had to answer; and the questions that I could not reply to—who was the dying friend? I told them the truth, that I really did not know; that the whole thing had taken place so suddenly, and the shock had been so great, that in my confusion and dismay I had omitted to ask the name, and had forgotten even if I had heard it. And the visitors returned in a state of great perplexity, I assure you, Colonel Hastings; but I did the best I could," said the clergyman's widow.

Colonel Hastings took but little notice of Mrs. Montgomery's remarks. He was absorbed in much more weighty matters, and was anxious to be alone with his son. As soon as the cloth was removed, and the wine set upon the table, she retired, leaving the two gentlemen alone.

"Now, then," exclaimed Colonel Hastings, turning towards his son, "here is a dilemma. What do you think of this?"

"Nay, I should ask that question of yourself, my dear sir. You, I understand, have been at the bedside of this woman Elmer, and have taken her dying deposition. What do you think of it?"

Before answering Colonel Hastings arose and went to each door to be sure that no one was hearing. Then he returned to his seat, stooped close to the ear of his son, and whispered:

"I think that the little village-maiden, Rose Elmer, is the true Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne. I think that the evidence leaves no doubt upon the question: and if that evidence should come before the House of Lords, she would be immediately declared as such."

"Well?"

"But that evidence shall never come before that tribunal. I was the magistrate who took that dying woman's deposition. The only other witness is in my pay, and at my mercy, and I know how to keep him subservient to one who can reward him with gold, or punish him with a jail; and he will be silent until I give him leave to speak. So make up your quarrel with Laura, and all evidence that might shake her in her possessions shall be suppressed."

"And suppose she refuses to make it up?"

"Then hold this evidence over her head as a rod of iron. Let her understand that, unless she consents to become your wife, you will bring forward this evidence of another's claim, and hurl her down from her high position. Let her find that her only safety is in becoming your wife."

"But I understand that Laura already admits the claim of her rival, and refuses to make any stand against it," said Albert Hastings.

"Oh! aye. I know that on the first flush of feeling, after this discovery, she is playing the magnanimous, and talks of

saving the claimant all trouble, by immediately abdicating her position, as the only atonement she can make for having wrongfully, though unconsciously, enjoyed it so many years."

"But, if she keeps that resolution?" inquired Mr. Hastings.

"She will not! She acted under impulse when she made it. Cool reflection will bring her to a different determination. She will defend her position, if not her rights, and to do this effectually she will make up her quarrel with you," said Colonel Hastings, filling and quaffing a glass of port.

"But now," suggested his son, "suppose that I, myself, decline to make up the quarrel?"

"You? Pooh! nonsense! I don't understand you!" hastily exclaimed the Colonel.

"Well, then, I will explain. To begin: you never imagined that I really loved this woman?" asked Mr. Hastings, with a sneer.

"Nay, excuse me! I always gave you credit for judgment to appreciate Lady Etheridge. Whether you really loved Laura or not, I cannot tell," laughed the father.

"You were quite right. I always appreciated Lady Etheridge of Swinburne. As my father, you ordered me to appreciate her—as a good son I obeyed you. At your command, I proposed for her hand, and was accepted. But it was only Lady Etheridge that I valued. If you suppose that I cared for Laura you are mistaken. Laura is a sort of woman that I detest. A woman whose very presence silently wounds my self-respect, whose every look, motion, and tone of voice has something in it that says, 'I am a being of a superior order.' This may be unconscious on her part, but it is, nevertheless, true. I loathe what is called a 'queenly' or a noble woman. No; I never loved Laura. If we had married, we should have led a terrible life. No; I detested Laura; but I valued the Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne."

"Well; to what does all this tend?" asked the Colonel, impatiently.

"Why, to the solution of a problem, that has plagued my heart for the last twelve months."

"In faith I do not understand you at all!" exclaimed the old man, almost losing his forbearance.

“Then I will explain. I hated Laura, but valued the Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne. I still hate Laura, and still value the Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne, who it seems is not Laura, but Rose Elmer, the poor maiden, whom I have loved for more than twelve months.”

CHAPTER IX.

A STARTLING ANNOUNCEMENT.

Approach the chamber, look upon the bed ;
Here is the passing of no peaceful ghost,
Which as the lark arises in the sky,
And morning's sweetest breeze and softest dews,
Is winged to Heaven by good men's sighs and tears.—*Old Play.*

MEANTIME Laura Elmer watched by the death-bed of her new found mother. It was a dreary vigil to the fallen peeress.

At length Rose came in, too deeply pre-occupied with her troubles to feel that embarrassment which she might otherwise have experienced in the presence of the lady.

There is a sublimity in great sorrows that lends a sort of natural dignity to those who feel, yet bear up under them. And thus it was with Rose, when calmed and steadied by the firmness with which she bore her grief. She entered the cottage and proffered to her distinguished visitor its humble hospitalities.

Laura thankfully accepted a cup of tea and a round of toast, prepared by the hands of Rose, and after partaking of these refreshments, she resumed her watch by the death-bed of the patient, who was fast passing away.

Rose lighted a taper, closed up the house, and sat down to join her guest in the vigil. They sat in silence until ten o'clock, when Rose said :

“Lady Etheridge, your ladyship watched all last night, and you must need rest. Pray permit me to show you up-

stairs to my little room ; it is clean and neat, though so poor, and you would rest well."

"I thank you, dear Rose ; but I could not sleep. I much prefer to watch ; but will you lie down ?"

"No, Lady Etheridge, I do not wish to leave my mother."

Thus strangely to Laura now sounded that name and title given to herself by the only one who had a right to wear it. But the time had not come to enlighten Rose, and she made no comment.

At the turn of the night, the sleeper awoke.

Seeing the two watchers at her bedside, she beckoned Laura. Laura, who sat nearest the bed's head, bent her ear.

Mrs. Elmer whispered :

"Have you told Rose, Laura ?"

"No, dear mother."

"Why do you hesitate ?"

"I do not hesitate. Colonel Hastings begged that I would say nothing to her until he could judge the real value of the evidence upon which you found her claim."

"He can judge of it by this time."

"Yes, dear mother, and so can I. And I only delayed informing her of her rights, lest our conversation should disturb your rest."

"Oh, Laura ! Tell her to-night. Tell her in my presence, that I may hear your words. I must see justice done before I die."

"It shall be done, my mother."

"Laura, promise me one thing."

"I do promise, mother ; but what is it ?"

"Promise that you will not oppose her in her rights, for, before high heaven, they *are* her rights."

"I willingly promise that, dear mother."

"You are of age, and so is she. Promise that you will not wait for the slow justice of the law ; that might keep her out of the property for years to come ; but that immediately after my death and burial you will yourself conduct her to the castle, and establish her there. Afterwards let the law confirm her rights at its leisure. Will you promise this ?"

"Most faithfully. It is only to do that which I had already resolved."

"Bless you! Bless you, Laura. And you, what shall you do, my child?" inquired the dying woman, anxiously.

"I shall join the daughters of toil, and learn for myself the meaning of poverty, that has been to me, all my life long, a mere empty word."

"But how will you endure this?"

"I know not, but I must learn as others have."

"But how will you support life, my daintily-reared Laura?"

"I have not yet thought of that, though I suppose I must turn some of my useless accomplishments to account."

"Become a governess, my proud Laura?"

"Something of that sort, if I can properly discharge the duties; but do not think of me, dear mother; think of yourself," said her daughter.

At this moment Rose, who had been at the fire, busy with a saucepan, and had not heard this conversation, approached the bedside, bringing a basin of gruel, which she affectionately pressed upon the sick woman's acceptance.

"Yes; I will take it, Rose; for I need a little strength to support what is yet to come," said Mrs. Elmer, while Laura raised her up, and supported her on the bed, and Rose fed her with spoonfuls of the restorative.

When she had taken sufficient, and was laid upon the bed, and when Rose had put away the basin, and resumed her seat at the bedside, Mrs. Elmer said:

"Child of my love and care, if not of my blood, do you remember the conversation we had yesterday afternoon before I sent you to the castle?"

"I do."

"You thought that very strange talk?"

"Yes, dear mother, but I ascribed it to your illness; you were not well."

"Nay; I was in my perfect senses, Rose, though I remember that you thought me mad and raving. I was not delirious then, dear Rose, nor am I now, when I address you as Rosamond, Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne," said Mrs. Elmer, solemnly.

"Oh! mother! mother! Pray do not ramble so dreadfully," exclaimed Rose, blushing scarlet; and then turning to her visitor and saying—"I am humbled to the earth, dear lady, to think that my poor mother will ramble so wildly! I please forgive her; she does not know what she is saying; her poor head is so bad."

"She knows what she is saying, Rose," gravely replied the lady.

"Oh! *indeed* she does not! She is rambling, wandering in her mind. She never would offend your ladyship so if she were in her right mind, or knew what she is saying. Pray do not be angry with her," pleaded Rose, with tears in her eyes.

"I am not angry with her; nor do you understand either me or her. She knows what she says; and I know that she speaks the truth," replied Laura, gravely.

"I—I am afraid that I am very stupid; either I do not hear rightly, or I do not understand your ladyship," said Rose, in her perplexity.

"Then I will speak more plainly. When my mother, your nurse, Mrs. Elmer, here present, treats you as Rosamond, Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne, she speaks the sober truth, for such you are," replied Laura, slowly and emphatically, fixing her eyes upon the perplexed face of her hearer.

Rose met that gaze with a fixed and vacant stare, that so far from understanding or receiving the idea that the words conveyed, seemed to refuse and repel them in dismay.

"Can you not understand me now, Rose? Have I not spoken plainly?" inquired the lady.

But the fixed and vacant look of Rose's eyes was unchanged, and the lady continued:

"You are the sole daughter and heiress of the late deceased baron; and in your own right you are Rosamond, Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne. Is that sufficiently clear?"

The color came and went upon the cheek of the maiden.

"Lady Etheridge!" she whispered, "is it necessary to humor my poor mother's strange fancy in this way? If it is, I suppose I must bear with it. Though it is very mortifying to be put in such an awkward position."

"Rose, I am not 'humoring' any strange fancy of your foster-mother; nor is she delirious. She speaks the words of truth and soberness; and I indorse them," said Laura.

"Oh! Lady Etheridge, it is very cruel to make a jest of me or account of my poor mother's delusion. I should not have thought it of you," exclaimed Rose, crimson with indignant shame.

"Rose, it is no wonder that you find it impossible at once to believe what I tell you; but, as I hope to answer it to Heaven, I speak the truth. You are Lady Etheridge of Swinburne. Can you believe me?"

"I wonder which of us three is crazy?" said Rose, looking from one to another.

"Neither of us, dear Rose; though what I have just divulged to you is enough to stagger your faith in our sanity. You are Baroness Etheridge; and as such you will, in a few weeks, be recognized by the whole world. Can you not receive this fact?"

"Lady Etheridge, if I am not quite mad—if I am in my right senses—if I know my own identity—I am Rose Elmer, the child of the village laundress; and *you* are the last Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne," said Rose, in amazement.

"No, Rose; I am only Laura Elmer, the daughter of Magdalene Elmer, the laundress."

Rose gazed in hopeless consternation upon the speaker.

At last the sick woman spoke.

"I see the crime must be confessed anew. Rose, you were the only child of the late baron, who left you in my charge, from the time you were but a few days old, until you were six months old. I had an infant girl of the same age. While the baron was gone, the demon tempted me to change you in your cradles; and when, at the end of six months, the baron returned, I hid you, his own child, from his sight, and gave him my child, whom he brought up and educated, in the belief that she was his own. Remorse for this act pursued me through life. Remorse for this act compelled me to this death-bed disclosure."

While she spoke, Rose, white and ghastly as a corpse, sank half-fainting into a chair.

"Now, at last, you understand and believe, Rose," said Laura, quietly.

"Oh! Lady Etheridge," replied Rose, covering her face with her hands.

"What is the matter, dear?" inquired Laura, kindly.

"Oh, Lady Etheridge, what a trial for you! And it was no fault of yours! Oh, Lady Etheridge, I never, never will interfere with your title, or with your estates. You were brought up to consider them yours. You know how to wear them. You are used to rank and wealth, as I am to poverty and obscurity. I will never interfere with this arrangement! It is too late now. It would be very cruel! Forget this painful revelation, Lady Etheridge, for I shall drive it from my own mind."

"Rose, dear, you rave! It is not in your choice to reject your good fortune, though the manner in which you receive it proves you most worthy of it, Rose. It is your duty to accept, as it is mine to resign this rank. And in yielding it, Rose, it is a comfort to know that I yield it to one who will wear the ancient name and title both gracefully and graciously," said Laura.

Rose remained with her head bowed and buried in her hands. The news of this sudden prosperity to herself, that brought with it such dire adversity to another, overwhelmed her like a calamity. She sat there bowed down by an honorable shame, at profiting by the noble-minded Laura's misfortunes.

"It is only some dream," she thought—"some wild vision of a feverish sleep! My mother, in the wandering of her mind, called me Baroness Etheridge, and I have gone to bed and am dreaming this foolish dream. I wish I could wake up. How these dreams deceive us! How real they seem! But presently I shall wake up, and it will be all right."

"Rose, will you permit me to be the first to offer you my congratulations? I wish you much joy in your reviving fortunes, Rose," said Laura, cheerfully.

Rose looked up with a bewildered gaze, and silently dropped her head again, thinking within herself:

"There she is, or seems to be, congratulating me! This

is not an ordinary dream ; it is more than that ; it is worse than that ; it is the dream of insanity or of brain fever. I have had much to try me lately—William Lovel's treachery the most of all ! And I braved him yesterday, and drove him from me, as I would indeed to-day, the traitor ! But my head is not strong ; it was too much for me ; and here is the reaction—a brain fever, and a foolish fancy that my mother's words were true, and that I am Lady Etheridge. Oh me, that I could get well, and find my right place again !”

“ Rose, rouse yourself ! Be equal to your great fortunes ! for I am sure you can be so !”

Rose looked up and smiled feebly. Then suddenly realizing her position, she burst into a wild paroxysm of tears, sobbing forth :

“ Oh, lady ! lady ! no great fortune in this world—not a throne—not an empire—can console for one lost love !”

These words, so strange to her hearers, had burst from her unawares, and the wild weeping and convulsive sobbing continued.

Laura went and took her in her own arms, saying :

“ Do not weep so—you agitate the sick, my dear. Lost love, did you say ? Have you lost love, Rose ? You, so young and fair, have you lost love ?”

“ Oh, lady, the words escaped me ! Think no more of them. Some day it may be my duty to tell you.”

All this while Magdalene Elmer had laid on her side, with her face turned towards the two, watching them, without ever removing her wild, dark eyes. And now she spoke :

“ You have made her understand, at last, Laura ?”

“ I think so, dear mother. Rose,” she said, turning to the maiden, “ you fully comprehend now that your fortunes have changed—that you are no longer Rose, the cottage girl, but Rosamond, Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne.”

“ Yes, I comprehend what you mean ; but I wish never, never to take that position.”

“ But duty, Rose—duty to your ancestors will oblige you to do so.”

“ Then, lady, you must share it equally with me. You must be my sister, as you are my foster sister, and share

every thing equally with me. And you must make the lawyers fix it so, that no one ever will be able to deprive you of the half of all I possess."

"Dear and generous Rose, I thank you from my profound heart! But this cannot be, my love. My own pride, Rose, would forbid me to become even your dependent, or receive heavy benefits from one as meek and gentle as yourself. I have lost every thing else, dear Rose. Let me feel that I have yet my conscious self-control."

With tears Rose repeated and urged her petition.

"Rose, ask your own heart, if I could do so consistently with my own self-respect? Could you do so in my place?"

Rose was silent, for she felt that in Laura Elmer's position, she would have done as Laura Elmer did.

"And I can serve you in no way at all? It is very distressing to me."

"Yes, Rose, you can do me a great favor—one that will very much console me in leaving the home of my childhood and youth."

"Oh, what is it? You know I would do any thing in the world for you."

"Then I will beg you, when you are mistress of the castle, to retain in your service all my old domestics. I should be grieved, indeed, to think that they should lose their places, or in any way suffer, through the change of dynasty at Swinburne."

"Oh, they shall not! oh, they shall not! I will keep them, every one! Oh, it mortifies me to talk so, as if I had any right to say whether they should go or stay."

"We are talking too much by this sick-bed, I fear," said Laura, leaning over the form of the suffering woman.

"No, no," replied the latter, opening her eyes; "no; I wish that all should be settled before I go hence."

"All is settled, dear mother. I am of age, you know, and no longer in the power of Colonel Hastings, so that in this affair I can do as I like and you wish. Were I a minor, Colonel Hastings, as my guardian, might choose to contest the claim of Rose. But as I have attained my majority, I shall use my freedom to do justice. I shall myself, without

waiting for the law, abdicate the estate to Rose. I shall take her to the castle, and install her there. The House of Lords, I presume, will take up the case, and confirm her in her rights, at their leisure. But in the meantime she will be in the full enjoyment of her rights."

"God bless you, Laura! You have a noble heart. When will you conduct Rose to the castle?"

"Mother, mother!" interrupted Rose—"let me still call you mother—I will never leave you while you live."

"She is right," said Laura Elmer. "We must not leave you."

"Then, when all is over, you will do as you promise?" inquired Mrs. Elmer.

"We will," replied her daughter, gravely.

The suffering woman, quieted by these assurances, dropped into a deep sleep, that lasted several hours.

The physician that Laura had employed to attend her mother arrived in the course of the morning, and expressed his opinion that her awakening would probably be decisive for life or death.

And so it proved. Magdalene Elmer awoke only once again to ask forgiveness of heaven and of earth, to bless her wronged child and foster child, and then she sank into her last sleep of death.

Laura mourned for the parent found only to be lost, and Rose wept bitterly for one who had always seemed a most tender mother to her.

Of Magdalene Elmer it might be said, her sins were buried with her—her repentance and her affection survived her in the memories of Rose and Laura.

Laura retained her self-command and assumed the direction of affairs.

After the funeral, Laura placed Rose in a close carriage, and conducted her to Swinburne Castle.

CHAPTER X.

THE NEW BARONESS.

Will fortune never come with both hands full?
But since her fair words still wish foulest letters,
She either gives a stomach and no food,
Such are the poor in health, or else a feast,
And takes away the stomach, such the rich,
That have abundance, and enjoy it not.—*Shakspeare.*

RUMORS of the change of ownership had reached the castle. And as the carriage drew up before the central hall door, the head servants arrayed themselves in the hall to welcome back their beloved lady. First, on the right and left, stood the steward and the housekeeper. They bowed and courtesied low as Laura led Rose through the hall and up the broad staircase to a pleasant apartment that had been the late Lady Etheridge's morning room.

"Take off your bonnet and mantle here, dear Rose; we will have some luncheon and then rest; to-morrow you must be presented to the household as the baroness."

"Oh, no; dear lady, no! not yet. I am frightened at this great place, and all those military-looking attendants. Do not tell them yet, and do not ever leave me!" exclaimed the terrified maiden.

She was far from rejoicing at her good fortune. The death of her foster-mother, the treachery of her trusted lover had nearly broken her heart, and now this vast wealth suddenly fallen upon her, had crushed her spirit like a great calamity.

"Do not leave me, Lady Etheridge! Oh, never leave me in this vast wilderness of splendor alone. I shall go mad!" she wildly exclaimed.

"Sweet Rose, you will not be alone. Mrs. Montgomery is a good woman; she is your near relative as she has always been supposed to be mine; and you will find her very kind and very competent to become your *chaperone* in that society which will quickly gather around you after your position

has been confirmed by the house of peers, as it must be in a few months," said Laura, with her usual calm, sweet seriousness.

"Oh, Lady Etheridge! I care nothing for all these things!" said Rose, very sadly.

"Do not call me by a title to which I have no right, my dear; call me Laura or Miss Elmer, which you please. And now let me tell you that you should care for these things, Rose! You should value the gifts of Providence, in gratitude to the Giver, and you should consider now much good you may do with this power."

"Ah! but if you knew—if you knew—how much I have suffered!"

"I do know, dear Rose. I know that you have suffered; but I am ignorant of the nature of your sufferings. It is something beside the loss of her whom you loved as your mother; that indeed would cause you deep grief, but not a bitter, misanthropical, hopeless case like this. Come, you must unbosom yourself to me, it will relieve you."

"Oh, no! no, lady! to you least of all others ought I to speak of my troubles!"

"Nay; to me of all others you should talk of them. For, Rose, I have been wounded in the very depth of my heart!"

"You, lady! Oh, yes, I know. It is a great reverse; I wish it had not happened," said Rose, thinking that Laura Elmer alluded to her sudden vicissitude of fortune.

"It is not that; that could not have touched my heart, still less have pierced it as this other blow has. No, Rose, it is this—my marriage is broken off."

"Your marriage broken off! Oh, lady, how was that?" said Rose, remembering that she had heard the same fact from Albert Hastings—yet wishing to know more.

"It was in consequence of my change of fortune."

"Oh! the traitor! Oh! the base traitor!" exclaimed Rose.

"Hush, my dear. I cannot hear the man whom I once loved spoken of in this manner," said Laura, with gentle dignity.

"Ah! but, then you do not know all his treachery yet!"

or, how much right I have to call him a traitor! And now, since I hear from your own lips that the marriage is broken off, and the reason for it, I will tell you something which you ought to hear; that you may dismiss forever from your heart the memory of such a traitor."

Laura looked up in amazement.

Rose paused a moment to recover her self-control, and then commenced and related the history of her acquaintance with Albert Hastings from the time that he presented himself to her, under the name of Lovel, to the time that she discovered him to be the betrothed husband of Lady Etheridge.

"And that was the cause of your fainting in the library that day?" said Laura.

"It was, lady; I am ashamed to acknowledge the weakness. I never again will faint, or even weep for that traitor!" exclaimed Rose, with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes.

"Hush, Rose; I cannot endure to hear you call him thus."

"But why? You know that he is a traitor—false to me—false to you. Why then should I not call him so?"

"Because I will not hear it! Having once loved Albert Hastings, I will not speak ill of him. He may be all that you say—false, selfish, treacherous, utterly unworthy. I may have been obliged to discard him forever. But having once been crowned with my love, he is sacred as a king from reproaches," said this noble-hearted, high-souled woman.

The entrance of luncheon interrupted the conversation.

After an early tea, Laura and Rose, both greatly needing rest, retired to their respective chambers.

Rose was shown up to hers, by a pretty, neatly attired housemaid, who informed her that she had been appointed the young lady's personal attendant.

"My name is Anne, Miss; and please can I do any thing for you?" inquired this girl, as she put the night-lamp upon the dressing-table.

"No, Anne, thank you, you may go," replied the cottage girl, to whom the attendance of a maid was more embarrassing than useful.

When the woman had retired, little Rose looked around with affright upon the vast, sumptuous, solitary room in

which she found herself. The sombre magnificence of the spacious apartment, and the gloomy grandeur of the heavily-curtained bedstead, oppressed her spirits.

"The chamber is like the inside of a cathedral, and the bed is like a tomb! Oh, if this is to be a peeress, I had rather by far be a peasant," thought Rose as she undressed and retired within the strong fortification termed "a four-poster."

The next morning Laura Elmer summoned her *chaperone*, Mrs. Montgomery, to the library, presented Rose to the ancient gentlewoman, and explained to her the strange discovery that had reversed the places of the baroness and the cottage girl. It was a long time before Mrs. Montgomery could be made to understand that Rose Elmer was really the Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne, and that she whom the old lady had hitherto been assured was such, was only the daughter of the village laundress. And when at last this truth was forced upon her mind, it very nearly turned her brain. She could not comprehend why such a great change of ownership, involving such a vast estate, should be effected without the help of many lawyers, and a great lawsuit. And she could not approve of Laura anticipating the majestic slowness of the law, by doing prompt and simple justice.

"Do not be alarmed, Mrs. Montgomery; you shall have a suit all in good time; the affair will come before the house of peers; they will have to confirm Rose in her rights; but, in the meantime, as they are likely to be most nobly tedious, I prefer to put Rose in immediate possession, that she may enjoy her fortune," said the high-souled Laura.

"Hem! well. I am glad the peers *will* investigate this strange affair. She does look like the Etheridges, that is certain; but she may be an Etheridge with the bar sinister across the arms—a sort of *Fitz-Etheridge*!" sneered the old lady.

"Do I not tell you that she is not? She is the only child of the late baron, by his lawful wife, the late Lucy Tremorne," said Laura, a little impatiently, as she commenced and recapitulated all the evidence of Rose's birth and lineage.

"Well, well, 'those that live longest will see most,'" quoth the clergyman's widow; and having uttered this unanswerable adage, she solaced herself with a pinch of snuff

The old housekeeper and butler were next informed of the change of proprietorship, and commissioned to break the news to the rest of the household. They had been old and faithful servants of the late lord, and were deeply attached to his house. Greatly as they were shocked and perplexed by all that they heard, they readily comprehended their duty to their late lord's daughter, whoever that daughter might now prove to be. And deeply as they were distressed by the reverses of one whom they had so long loved and revered as their lady and mistress, they performed the task intrusted to them with fidelity and discretion. And thus, before the day was over, all the household obscurely understood that little Rose Elmer was the Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne, and that she who had so long and worthily borne that name and title was just Laura Elmer, the daughter of the late gamekeeper. But not one jot or tittle less of respect and honor did the high-esteemed Laura receive from those who esteemed her more for personal worth and dignity, than for adventitious wealth and rank.

That evening Rose retired to rest, the acknowledged lady of Swinburne Castle.

The next morning, while the ladies were still lingering over the breakfast table, a pair of cards was laid before them, bearing the names "Colonel Hastings," "Albert Hastings, Esq."

"Where have you shown those gentlemen?" asked Laura Elmer

"Into the drawing-room, my lady," answered the man, who, from the force of habit, still addressed his late mistress by her title.

"Whom did they inquire for?"

"Miss Elmer," replied the footman.

"Right; say that I shall be with them in a few moments," said Laura.

The servant, with a low bow, retired.

"Lady Etheridge, it was I whom they wanted," said Rose, who persisted in giving the *ci-devant* baroness her abdicated title.

"Nay, dear, they inquired for Miss Elmer," said Laura, smiling "and 'bat is my name

"Ah! but they never knew *you*, and always only knew *me* by that name."

"There is something in that. It is really very doubtful whom they *did* want—you, who always went by that name, or me, who have the only right to it! And the same difficulty would have arisen had they inquired for the Lady Etheridge. We should not have known whether they wished to see me, who always bore the title, or you, who have the only right to it. We must expect for a long time yet, Rose, to be thought of and designated by our old names—you, as Miss Elmer—I, most unwillingly, as Lady Etheridge! But this will wear out in time. But in the present doubtful case, as to whom these gentlemen really want to see, I think that as they inquired for Miss Elmer, and as I am the only person now bearing that name, I had better see them."

"Oh! lady, I know. In this doubtful case you wish to save me from a painful interview with those men; and by going to meet them yourself. But, dearest lady, will it not be equally painful to you?"

"No, dear Rose; for I have more self-command than you have; and this self-command gives one a great power over others."

"Oh, then, I thank you, and accept your kindness," said Rose.

Laura immediately arose from the table, and left the breakfast for the drawing-room.

Never had Laura Elmer looked more nobly beautiful than upon this morning, when she went to meet her treacherous friends—if such a phrase as that comprised in the last two words be not a paradox. Her simple mourning-dress of black bombazine fell around her stately form like the graceful drapery of some antique statue. The sable band of her rich black hair divided upon her noble forehead, and encircled her queenly head, like the coronet of some Grecian goddess. Her face was pale with thought and care, and her magnificent dark eyes shone with mournful splendor as she walked into the room.

Colonel and Mr. Hastings, who were both seated, arose to meet her.

"Good-morning, gentlemen. Pray resume your seats. You inquired for me, I believe? How can I be so happy as to serve you?" she said.

"Nay, we are very happy to see you, Lady Etheridge; but we *inquired* for Miss Elmer," said Colonel Hastings, while Mr. Hastings, after bowing deeply, stood silently before her.

"Miss Elmer you know to be my name; while you do but mock myself and the truth when you call me Lady Etheridge," said Laura Elmer, gravely, as she motioned them to seats, and took a chair for herself.

"Then," said Colonel Hastings, "you really are resolved to give up this title and estates without a struggle?"

"I have already given up all right, title, and interest in the barony and estates of Etheridge of Swinburne. I have inducted the true heiress into her rights, and introduced her to her household. I have caused Rose Elmer to be acknowledged the Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne, a title in which, you know, the House of Lords, when they shall have heard the evidence in her favor, will confirm her."

"I judged that such would be the rashness of your folly, Laura! But, pardon me, cannot we be permitted to speak with this Rose Elmer?"

"You shall see Lady Etheridge," replied Laura, with a slight *congé*, as she left the room.

"You must go to them, my dear; they inquired for you! be firm," said Laura Elmer, as she re-entered the breakfast-room, and sent Rose to meet the visitors.

As Rose entered the drawing-room, she caught a glimpse of Colonel Hastings, retreating into the conservatory, so as to leave her alone with his son.

Albert Hastings hurried to meet her, with outstretched hands, beaming eyes, and earnest will, beginning to say:

"My adored Rose! I have sought so often and so vainly to see you. And at last I am more fortunate. Dear Rose——"

"Come no nearer, Mr. Hastings," said Rose, raising her hand with a forbidding gesture, while her whole face crimsoned with honest indignation. "And, indeed, I do not know why you should presume to come at all; you inquired for me

as I understand, and I stand before you, only to say that which I hope will induce you to shorten your visit, and prevent you from ever repeating it. And this is what I have to say, Mr. Hastings, Miss Elmer and myself have had a full explanation, and——”

“Oh, and thus you are made aware by this frantic woman that you are the Lady Etheridge of Swinburne, and with the conceit of a peasant, raised to the peerage, you would break with the friends of your humbler life, and aspire to—heaven knows what!—for there is no limits to an undisciplined imagination!” exclaimed Albert Hastings, forgetting his manhood in his anger.

“Nay,” said Rose, crimsoning with indignation—“I care nothing for these things, as you should know, if you had ever known more of me than the color of my complexion. I care nothing about this barony: and the explanation to which I alluded runs upon quite another subject. In a word, Mr. Hastings, Miss Elmer and myself have done you more honor than you deserved in discussing your merits at large. She did not need to tell me of your long engagement to her, for that fact was public property; nor did she require to inform me of all the false vows you breathed into her ear, for those I had the questionable benefit of being compelled to overhear. But *I* told *her* every thing you ever said or swore to *me*. And after such a mutual discussion of you—your truth—honor—disinterestedness—and general magnanimity—you may judge the verdict we made up upon your case. We coincided exactly in our judgment of your character and deservings—the only difference being that *she*, the high-souled, queenly woman, considered the man, however unworthy, whom she had once crowned with her love, sacred forever from her reproaches; while I, Mr. Hastings, can find no word strong enough to express the revulsion of feeling that has turned all my regard for you into loathing and disgust.”

“Insolent girl! your supposed good fortune has quite turned your head! How dare you call the lady of this nouse ‘Miss Elmer,’ or presume to suppose that there is any truth in the ridiculous story that would constitute *you*, a peasant girl, Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne? Coronets are not

given away so readily, let me tell you !" exclaimed Albert Hastings, beside himself with rage.

"I call the lady of this house Miss Elmer, because she has requested me to call her thus. As for the truth of the story that would constitute me Baroness Etheridge, I care nothing about it, except that I have a slight hope that it may prove to be a mistake. As for the coronet of which you speak, I do not want it. I am as unfit to wear the coronet of a baroness, as you are to wear the form of manhood," said Rose severely, for this pretty little creature could let fly terrible shafts of rebuke from those rosy lips of hers.

Albert Hastings paced up and down the floor, chafing with shame and anger, and trying hard to control himself.

Rose stood like a young destroying angel where he had left her. She had neither seated herself nor invited him to be seated ; for Rose acted the part of an indignant maiden rather than the rôle of a fine lady ; and how beautiful she looked as she stood there. Her dazzling blonde beauty, in contrast with her dark mourning habiliments, shone like a star on the brow of night.

Albert Hastings walked up and down the floor in fierce impatience, striving with himself until he had attained some degree of composure, when he suddenly paused before Rose, and said :

"Rose, I beg you will pardon my mad words. I scarcely knew what I was saying. Your cruelty and scorn really drove me to frenzy. Rose ! I love you to distraction. I always have done so ! I always shall do so. Rose, do not let us quarrel. I know that you are the rightful heiress of Swinburne ; and I came hither to-day, Rose, to offer you my best services to assist you in the establishment of your rights, but your stinging words provoked me to an unmanly retort, for which I humbly beg your pardon, Rose. Say you forgive me ; consent to be mine, and I will devote all my time, means, and energies, to the establishment of your claims to the barony of Swinburne. You will want all the aid you can get, Rose, for, believe me, the House of Lords will not easily transfer the title from one who has so long borne it, to another of obscure origin. Answer me, dear Rose, but before you

answer me, remember that I, who now implore you to become my wife, loved you before the rising of your sun of fortune—loved you, and won your love while you were simple Rose Elmer.”

“And while you were the betrothed husband of another. Do you imagine that to remind me of your perfidy, and my delusion, will be a ready road to my favor? I had given you credit for more worldly wisdom. I return you due thanks for your disinterested proffer of services. Of course, so unselfish a friend as yourself will be rejoiced to hear that they are not in the least wanted. Miss Elmer has already ceded to me all that is claimed as my right; and if I am not quite indifferent whether the House of Peers confirms my claim or not, it is because I have some faint hopes that they will reinstate her, who has so long, and so worthily, worn the honors of that ancient house; and now, Mr. Hastings, you will permit me to wish you an eternal farewell!” And so saying, the young girl bowed, and withdrew from the room.

Albert Hastings started forward to intercept her with drawal, but was too late; she glided from the room so quickly that she disappeared before he could take three steps. The baffled and frantic plotter was about to follow her, but was stopped by his father, who hurried from the conservatory, and laid his hand upon his son's arm, saying:

“What are you about, you young fool? Sit you down and listen to me.”

“All is lost if I let her leave me in this mood!” exclaimed Mr. Hastings, throwing himself into a chair.

“Ridiculous! Nothing is lost or in danger. Listen to me, who knows women in all their phases—which are much more various than those of the moon, let me tell you—and have known them since forty years before you were born: that girl loves you to distraction!”

“Ha! ha! ha! She takes the strangest way of showing it!” exclaimed young Hastings, with a sardonic laugh.

“No, she does not. She takes a perfectly natural, and very common way of showing it—namely, by excessive, even insane anger, at the discovery that you had been making love to another woman. Give her anger time to cool, and then will come the reaction of old love and weakness.”

"But she is ten times as angry as the other one ! It would be far easier to make up with Laura than with Rose, were that desirable," said Albert Hastings, impatiently.

"There you are quite mistaken. Laura Elmer is the proudest woman alive ; and not a whit the less proud as Laura Elmer than she was as Baroness Etheridge ; but rather more so, for her pride is founded on personal self-esteem, that no change of external circumstances can shake. By your falling off, her pride and love were both wounded ; but her very forbearance shows the indomitable resolution with which she has broken with you forever. A woman must be eternally estranged from a man of whom she has said these words, which I overheard your Rose repeat : 'The man who has ever been crowned with my love, however unworthy, is forever sacred, as a king, from my reproaches.' Reconciliation, if it were desirable—which it is not—it yet would be impossible with this uncoroneted baroness—this haughty plebeian, Laura Elmer. No, no ! You must make up your quarrel with that enraged little beauty, Rose."

"But if she will not ?"

"But she will. And if she should be very long in coming to her senses, I possess a talisman that will bring her to reason."

"And what is that ?" inquired the young man, looking up with curiosity.

"The power to pull her down from her present position to her original obscurity," exclaimed the elder, sternly.

"I doubt if you have that power. Remember that the evidence of her rights has gone out of your hands into that of others."

"And that is the extent of your knowledge of the business ?" exclaimed Colonel Hastings.

"And besides, sir, if you had such a power, such an argument avails but little with her, who manifestly cares little or nothing for rank and wealth."

"And that is the extent of your knowledge of human nature ! If little Rose cares nothing for her great good fortune, it is simply because its vast magnitude has quite overwhelmed her—stunned her into apathy. Wait until she

recovers from that insensibility, and actively wakes up to the knowledge and appreciation of all the advantages of her position! Wait until the House of Peers and the voice of society has confirmed her in, and time has accustomed her to the retinue, luxury, splendor, and adulation, that must attend the steps of a young, beautiful, wealthy, and unmarried baroness, and *then* see whether she would not sell her soul rather than lose her position."

"Aye, such a change may—nay, most likely will—come over her; but in that case will she be inclined to favor the suit of a commoner like myself?"

"Yes; for she loves you, despite her sharp anger. And, if she should hesitate long, I will hurry her movements by exhibiting the power I possess of hurling her down from rank, wealth, luxury, splendor, and adulation, to obscurity, want, hardship, squalor, and contempt," said the old colonel, with a sort of savage satisfaction.

"But, in the name of heaven, how can you do that, sir, when once the House of Lords has confirmed her title?" inquired Albert Hastings, in astonishment.

"Easily! By showing that, after all the evidence, she is really *not* the heiress of Swinburne!"

"Not the heiress of Swinburne! In the name of all that is inexplicable, how could you prove that?"

"By producing and proving the true heir!"

"And—that is, after all, Laura?"

"No!"

"What, sir! neither Laura nor Rose the real heir! Who, then, in the name of wonder, is?"

"One whom you cannot marry. Therefore, I shall keep silent upon the subject until you see whether you can marry Rose. If she prove obstinate, I shall let her know that she holds her position at my will! and only upon condition that she marries my son!"

"You are the best of fathers, my dear sir! But are you quite sure of what you say?"

"Entirely! I have proof enough to overwhelm every court in the kingdom."

"How long have you preserved this secret, sir?"

“Since the night upon which the late baron died!”

“What! during the whole time that you administered the estates as the guardian of Laura?”

“Yes! but I was managing the estates and educating the heiress as a bride for my son, who was designed to be the master of Swinburne Castle, with, perhaps, the reversion of the title! Now, since a claimant with right has displaced her, I say, woo and marry that claimant! But, if she refuses, she shall in her turn give place to another, who has the greatest and the only right! So you shall be master of Swinburne, despite the caprices of these two women, for the barony of Swinburne is in our power!” said Colonel Hastings, with savage triumph.

“It is over! and oh! heaven grant that it may never, never come again!” cried Rose, rushing wildly into the morning-room, and throwing herself into the arms of her friend.

“What is over, dear Rose?” said Laura, tenderly embracing her.

“That terrible interview with Albert Hastings! Oh! I hope he will never, never come again! And oh! if he does, never, never send me to him again. It was as much as I could do to maintain proper self-control while with him. You do not know what the effort cost me.”

“Yes, I do, sweet girl. I see it. You are quite broken down by it. But, Rose, compose yourself, and listen to me. It is strange that both you and I should have been so mistaken in that man, as to first esteem and then love him.”

“Oh! was it not? And I thought him the most noble being on the face of the earth!”

“And so did I, who, having seen more of the world than yourself, should have had more insight into character. But then, this is only another instance of the old delusion of mere external beauty. A beautiful body and a beautiful soul should be united. Such is our instinctive idea; and upon that idea we invariably act; and such, no doubt, was the case in the old primeval days of human innocence. But never since the fall of man, Rose, has it been invariably so. A well-proportioned form and regular features do not always

inclose a harmonious soul, or insure a virtuous life. Of Albert Hastings, Rose, you and I thought that his noble brow indicated honor; his clear blue eyes, truth and frankness; his softly curved, yet firmly chiselled lips, benevolence, tenderness, and constancy; his stately form, magnanimity. And thus it should have been; but it was not. We were ambitious; let us forget him, Rose."

"But how to do so? I remembered him to honor him once! I remember him to hate him now," exclaimed Rose, with a burst of hysterical weeping.

"Do not! or there will be a reaction, and you will love him again. You will go from this extreme to that; the pendulum sways as far to the right as to the left. Moderate your emotions, Rose. These storms of passion make terrible havoc of your frail little body."

"Oh, how can I? how can I help it?" cried Rose.

"By occupying your thoughts with any other subject rather than with him. Think of something else. You have plenty of other subjects of interest; one thing, one thing of imminent and pressing necessity is, that you should begin to prepare yourself by study, for the sphere of life upon which you are about to enter; and you have no time to lose, for though you look so young and childish, you are, in reality, over twenty-one. Now, will you follow my counsel?"

"Oh! yes, yes, dear lady. I would follow your counsel forever. Would that we were never to part!"

"That is impossible, dear Rose! partings must come in a world like this. But here is my advice—that you retain Mrs. Montgomery here, in the same relation as she stood towards me, and that you employ the best masters and mistresses in all the modern languages, and in all the various branches of music, and other drawing-room accomplishments; also that you enter upon a regular course of English reading, under the direction of the vicar of this parish—a worthy man, and profound scholar, whom I shall be glad to introduce to you."

"Oh, how magnanimous you are to direct me, when I so much need guidance. But, oh, lady, if you could only remain with me. You said that you intend to become a governess,

or something of that sort. Why can you not stay here, where you have been accustomed to dwell, and direct my studies? I should be the most docile and obedient pupil in the world," said Rose, innocently, and fixing her appealing eyes upon her friend.

"Why?" said Laura Elmer, crimsoning. She paused a few moments, and then answered:

"Because I am human, Rose! Because, though I have honor enough promptly to resign a position to which I have no just right, I have not sufficient humility to accept a subordinate situation in a house where I have been accustomed to be paramount."

"Oh, lady; I see, I see, I beg your pardon with all my heart, I beg your pardon," exclaimed Rose, blushing.

"There is no need, dear Rose; there is no offence. But now you can estimate my feelings, and understand why it is that I must live far from this place."

"Oh, yes, yes," exclaimed Rose, weeping bitterly.

Laura caressed and soothed her.

"Strange," she thought—"I who have lost every thing on earth, except myself, have to comfort this girl for gaining every thing that I have lost."

* * * * *

In the course of the next week, it was generally known throughout the country that the old barony of Swinburne had changed proprietors. The Rector, Dr. William Seymour, called at the castle to discover for himself the truth of the report, and the reason for the breaking off of the marriage engagement between the *ci-devant* baroness and her chosen husband.

Laura received him with her usual *suave* and stately courtesy, and promptly related to him the history of the last month. She then spoke most kindly of Rose, the new baroness and sought to enlist for her, the sympathy and assistance of the learned and excellent man. This was readily promised by that minister, who next inquired:

"And you, my child, what are your plans for the future?"

"I shall remain with Rose for a few weeks longer, until she is more at ease in her changed circumstances. And in the

meantime I shall advertise in the *Times* for the situation of a private governess in some gentleman's or nobleman's family," replied Laura with a faint smile.

"The usual resort of reduced gentlewomen! Oh, my child, that you should be brought to this!" said the old man, with tears gushing from his eyes.

"Why? I have had my share of the good things of this world. Why should I not know something of the evil things thereof, also? If, indeed, this reverse be an evil thing! I have known wealth, luxury, and adulation! why should I not be made acquainted with want, labor and oppression?"

"Oh, my child, you are both wiser and stronger than I am; fitter to instruct your old pastor than he is to teach you! 'Verily, out of the mouths of babes and sucklings hath God perfected praise.'"

"Not in this instance—not in this instance," replied Laura, with bowed head; "but, dear sir, I may rely upon your aid in furthering my views, so far as your recommendation goes? You have known me from infancy, and would, perhaps, indorse my moral and intellectual competency for the situation I am seeking to fill?"

"My dear Laura, command my services in all things," replied the pastor, with tears in his eyes.

"And now I have occupied you sufficiently with myself, I wish to introduce Rose," she said, touching the bell-cord.

A footman entered.

"My compliments to Lady Etheridge, and say that Dr. Seymour is here, and desires to be presented to her," said Laura.

The footman, with a bow, withdrew.

"My dear child, how easily you bestow that ancient title, that you have worn so long, upon another," said Dr. Seymour.

"And how meekly she bears it. You do not know her sweet humility.—But here she comes!" said Laura, as the door opened, and the fairest beauty that he had ever seen glided into the room.

"Lady Etheridge, Dr. Seymour, our rector," said Laura, quietly.

Rose blushed painfully upon hearing herself called by this

title, and dropped a courtesy that savored more of the Sunday-school girl than of the fine lady. And the worthy doctor bowed, and held out his hand to one whom he regarded rather in the character of a simple cottage-girl than as the lady of the castle. Rose knew the rector much better than the rector knew her, for she had seen him many times walking or riding through the village; but she had never attended his church. Her foster-mother, in those days of remorse, in which she could not endure the sight of any one from the castle, had sedulously avoided the church attended by that family; and so, whenever she had felt disposed to assist in Divine worship, she went to a Dissenting chapel in the village, the minister of which afterwards soothed her dying hours, and performed her funeral obsequies.

Thus, Rose and the rector had never met before. This meeting, however, benevolently brought about by Laura, proved mutually pleasing to the parties. The worthy rector could but be pleased with the beautiful and unassuming girl, upon whom the baroness's coronet had so suddenly descended. And Rose felt her courage rise as her confidence rested upon the venerable minister who was to be her neighbor, pastor, and guide.

The doctor promised to assist the views of both these young persons, and then, after joining them at their luncheon, took his leave.

Dr. Seymour busied himself in procuring proper masters for the young heiress, Rose, and also a respectable situation for the disinherited Laura. And the end of another month saw Rose fairly launched upon her course of study, and Laura on her road to London to take her situation of governess in the family of a baronet, who was then living in town.

Rose wept bitterly at parting from her noble-hearted, high-souled friend, and Laura consigned her for comfort to the benevolent care of the aged pastor and his family.

The charge was faithfully undertaken by Dr. Seymour.

"Although her backward education makes it advisable that that she should not enter general society as yet, still she must have some company of her own rank," said the good man; and forthwith he called upon several of the noble and "gen-

cle" families of that neighborhood, with whom he used his influence to induce them to "take up" this young new-comer into their ranks, even before the highest tribunal in the realm should confirm her rights.

And with one accord, but from various motives, the country families agreed to call upon this young meteor that had come into their orbit.

Some called from motives of compassion, to see a young creature so utterly destitute of kindred and friends; others from policy sought the acquaintance of the wealthy heiress; others, again, had younger sons to provide for, and thought Swinburne Castle not a bad fortune for a cadet of a noble family; others called from mere impertinent curiosity; and all resolved upon one course—to "take her up" so long as she remained a disputed heiress of Swinburne, and Baroness Etheridge, but to "drop her" the moment the House of Lords should fail to confirm her title.

And so, from the day of Laura's departure, scarcely a day passed that there were not visitors at Swinburne castle.

to her betrothed husband, the several documents had been collected and intrusted to young Cassinove, with directions to proceed immediately to London, and lodge them, for greater security, in the hands of the family solicitor, and afterwards to go to the house in Portman-square, and await the return of his patron. And the young man, glad to escape the presence of that queenly woman, whom he could not look upon without love, and could not love without sin, promptly obeyed the orders of his employer, and the same night set out on his journey to London. In due time he reached the city, executed his commission, and retired to his own peculiar den in a great house in Portman-square, to await the arrival of Colonel Hastings, who was expected in town immediately after the marriage of his son and the departure of the happy pair upon their bridal tour. With his whole soul consuming with a passion that his reason assured him to be as well founded in esteem as it was hopeless in prospect, young Cassinove passed many weary days, vaguely wondering at the prolonged absence and unaccountable silence of his patron. At that day news did not travel with any thing of the alacrity with which it does now. Young Cassinove heard nothing of the marriage, and the castle.

Nearly a
square

venerable patron had not been for once overtaken by intoxication.

"I trust, sir, that no misfortune," began Ferdinand, but he was interrupted by a terrible torrent of profanity, and the words—

"Misfortune, misfortune! Worse, sir. A confoundedly ridiculous *contretemps* that has made us a nine days' wonder—a town-talk all over the country."

"What ever it was, it does not in any way affect Mr. Hastings or his bride."

"Perdition, sir! It was just those two whom it did affect," exclaimed the old man.

Ferdinand turned very pale, and moved a step nearer, and then, from very agitation, sank back into his chair, murmuring—

"And what, sir, if I may be permitted to ask, is the nature of this calamity, and the manner in which it touches Mr. Hastings and his bride?"

"Confound it, sir! At the very last moment it broke off the marriage."

Cassinove sprang upon his feet with a cry of irrepressible joy.

Colonel Hastings mistook this for an exclamation of astonishment, and thinking himself sure of an interested and sympathizing listener, he related, with many imprecations, the discovery that had been made at Swinburne, with the events that followed.

Young Cassinove listened with a joy that it was almost impossible to conceal, all the while saying to himself—

"She may yet be mine—she may yet be mine. This noble creature may yet be mine. Oh, what a revulsion from despair to hope and happiness! Now I have an incentive to action; now I have an inspiration to live and do, and endure; now shall days of toil and nights of study anticipate the long passage of years, and I will win fame and wealth to lay both at her feet. I will restore her more than she has lost. Hear it, oh, ye spirits that inspire and direct noble passions, and bless my efforts!"

While these glowing hopes and inspirations warmed the

bosom of the ardent young Italian, Colonel Hastings brought his long story to an end, concluding with the words—

“And, of course, you must be aware, Cassinove, that there could be but one line of action for us, my son’s destined bride being proved an impostor.”

“Impostor, sir,” indignantly interrupted the young man.

“Well, not impostor, exactly, since she was no conscious party to the fraud that imposed her upon the late baron as his daughter and heiress; but as she was discovered and proved to be the daughter of the late game-keeper, of course, a family of unblemished lineage like our own could not possibly receive her. Mr. Albert Hastings, with my full approbation, requested to be freed, and was freed, from his engagement to her.”

“The base traitor!” exclaimed Cassinove, in indignant scorn.

“Sir!” vociferated the colonel, in astonishment at his secretary’s boldness.

“I say *the base traitor!* And would to heaven I had the brother’s privilege of chastising him for the most infamous act that I ever knew a man to be guilty of!”

“Sir! by the Lord, sir! what do you mean, sir?”

“I mean to express fully my opinion of your son’s base conduct, sir! which, as you approve it, you shall hear. He was the pure love of a noble lady’s heart. She loved him so loyally, that while she still believed herself the Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne, she beggared herself to confer upon him her whole estates. But suddenly, without any fault of hers, she loses her title, rank and wealth. And in that bitter hour of reverses, he who has won her love, and taken her queenly gift, and promised her undying fidelity, and who should have been the first to console and sustain her under her heavy misfortunes; he, her betrothed husband, turned traitor, and deserted her in the hour of her direst need. Coward! caitiff! miserable libel upon all true manhood.”

“Get out of my house, sir!” cried the colonel, striding towards Cassinove, and shaking his fist.

“I intend to do so; but not until I have fully expressed my opinion. This seeming sad reverse of this most noble

lady is really no misfortune, but a happy vicissitude for her, since the same providential blow that deprived her of rank wealth, and title, dashed from her side a wretch unfit to breathe the same air, or tread the same earth with herself."

"Will you begone from my house, sir!" thundered the old colonel, advancing on him.

"I am gone! Not one moment would I remain in the service of those whose own lips defend their own dishonor."

The enraged old man rushed upon the younger one with uplifted hands and furious eyes.

But Cassinove, taking off his hat, turned and calmly confronted his employer, saying—

"Sir, the gray hairs that have not brought you respect yet protect you from resentment. I wish you good-night, Colonel Hastings, and a better understanding of that which really blemishes an unblemished lineage," and with a bow, the young man left the room, and hurried immediately to his own little den on the third floor, where he commenced preparations for a hasty departure. It was the work of a few moments to pack his slender wardrobe and small stock of books. Next he called a cab, ordered his luggage to be put upon the vehicle, and directed the driver to take him to No. 8 Flitting street. A half hour's drive through the intricate thoroughfares of the centre of London brought him to a small, clean-looking thread-and-needle shop, that bore over the door the sign "Ruth Russel." Pulling up here, he got out and went into the cheerfully lighted little shop that was for the moment occupied only by a neat little dark-haired woman of about thirty years of age, dressed in a widow's weeds and cap, and standing behind the counter.

"Well, Mrs. Russel, how does the business?" said young Cassinove, cheerfully, as he entered.

"Oh, very indifferently, I thank you, sir. Your last half dozen of shirts are quite finished, and I should have sent them yesterday, only Frank is sick with a cold, and little Emily does not know the way. How sorry I really am that you should have had the trouble to come."

"Reassure yourself, Mrs. Russel, I have not come about

the needlework. I wish to know if your second floor front is let?"

"Oh, no, sir! The rooms take no better than the shop, somehow. It seems very unlucky; but I suppose it is my fault."

"I am sure it is not; and, as a proof of my confidence, I have brought you a lodger in myself, if you will take me."

"Oh, willingly! gladly, sir!" replied the little widow, her black eyes beaming with delight. "When would you wish to take possession?"

"Immediately, if the rooms are ready. My luggage is at the door."

"Very well; I will have fires lighted there instantly. To air the rooms is all that is necessary," said Mrs. Russel, hurrying into the back parlor to give the necessary directions, while Cassinove went out to have his luggage brought in, and pay the cabman.

And in ten minutes more Mr. Cassinove was installed comfortably in his new quarters, consisting of a sitting-room front, and bed-room back, both very neat and clean, though small and plainly furnished. He threw himself into an old arm-chair, in front of the bright little fire which the dampness of the evening rendered necessary; and, while he discussed the tea and toast that stood upon a little table on his right, he reflected seriously upon his future prospects. He was possessed of a great versatility of genius, and had alternately devoted himself, with considerable success, to the arts of music, poetry, painting, sculpture; but he knew that these were seldom the passports to fame, and seldomer to fortune. And both must be won for Laura Elmer. He thought over all the self-made men of historical and contemporary times, who had risen from poverty and obscurity to wealth and distinction, and of the means by which they had achieved greatness. He found the two greatest avenues to fame and fortune to be the field and the forum, and the surest of these to be the latter. And, confident in the strength of his own versatile genius, when concentrated upon one great object, he resolved to tear himself away from the fascinating pursuit of poetry and the arts, and devote himself with assiduity

to the dry study of the law, and, as he said before, with days of toil, and nights of study, anticipate the slow passage of years.

“And if ever heart and flesh faint in the struggle, I will remember Laura Elmer, and live again!” he said, warming with enthusiasm at her very name.

And all these ardent aspirations and glorious hopes were for a woman he had only seen twice, and whom there appeared little chance of his ever seeing again.

But when did such considerations ever damp the spirit of a lover?

The one invincible obstacle was removed: she was free; she was reduced to his own rank; she had no other lover; there was every thing to hope.

Besides, who ever loses hope while the lady of his love lives? Nothing but her own death can deprive him of the secret hope of one day calling her wife.

Young Cassinove's hopes took the form of prophecy. He saw the future in the present,

But to enter upon the career by which he hoped some day to win wealth and distinction for the sake of Laura Elmer, a little money was absolutely necessary, and he had but a few sovereigns, the remnant of last quarter's salary. It was therefore necessary that he should set about something to replenish his exhausted purse.

He lost no time, but immediately unpacked his writing-case, set it upon his table, and wrote an advertisement to be put in the *Times*, to the effect that a young gentleman, a graduate of Christ Church, desired a situation as private tutor or secretary in a gentleman's or nobleman's family.

The same night he despatched this to the office of the *Times*, and within two days he received an answer, requesting him to call at No. —, Grosvenor-square.

The young man lost no time in donning his best walking-suit, carefully brushing his hat, and setting out for the appointment.

CHAPTER XII.

THE GOVERNESS.

Mind, revere thyself!
Stand upon thy worth.
Let not the frowns of fortune
Crush thee to the earth:
Cringe not to the fool,
Though by millions backed,
Keep thy native dignity
Evermore intact.—S. E. K

LAURA ELMER arrived in London alone, at nightfall. Leaving the mail-coach, she called a fly, had her luggage put on, and directed the driver to drive to a house in one of the most fashionable localities in the West End. An hour's ride brought her to within a few blocks of her destination. To get nearer seemed impossible, from the long line of carriages that stood along the street in front of the house, and stopped the way. Every circumstance seemed to indicate that a large evening party was being entertained at the house in question.

Laura put down the window, and asked the driver:

"Can you get no farther?"

"No, madam; not as yet," answered the cabman.

"How long shall we have to stay here?"

"Himpossible to say, mum. Here be a great crowd, as her la'ship his 'aving of a ball, or summut."

Laura sunk back in her seat, and waited perhaps half an hour before the cab drew up to the door, which, standing open, revealed a lighted hall, with a supercilious-looking porter, seated in an arm-chair, and several footmen in attendance—to one of whom Laura handed her card.

Laura Elmer was dressed in deep mourning, and muffled in the cloak and hood in which she had travelled from Swinburne. But there was in her air and manner a certain gracious dignity that seemed to mark her as a lady of high rank. The servant that received her card bowed low, and showed her up the broad staircase to the door of a cloak-room, where several splendidly-dressed ladies were laying off their wrappings before passing into the drawing-room.

Laura saw at once the servant's very natural error, and turning, said :

"I think you mistake me for one of the invited guests, this evening."

Even that explanation did not shake the servant's faith in the high position of the noble-looking woman before him. He glanced at her deep mourning, and thought he had found the reason why she was not a guest at the gay party. He answered, respectfully :

"I beg your pardon, madam ; if you will be so good as to walk into the library, I will take your card up to her ladyship."

And the man opened a door on the left, and showed the visitor into a spacious and richly-furnished library. Laura seated herself at a table, and mechanically turned over the leaves of a folio while waiting the return of the servant.

Presently she heard voices without the door—one was that of the footman who had carried up her card, and who seemed to be apologizing for the mistake he had made. The other was the voice of an elderly female servant, who was roundly lecturing the man in the following words :

"To carry up the governess's card to her ladyship in the drawing-room ! I'm ashamed of you, James ! but hi never could teach you the difference between a lady and a woman. Now I not honly know a lady from a wōman, but among ladies, hi can halways tell a mistress, han 'onerable mistress, countess, marchioness, and duchess, the minute hi see one, and hi graduates my respects haccordingly. Hand similarly among young ladies, I can tell at sight a miss, han 'onerable miss, hand a lady ; hand likewise graduates my respects haccordingly. Now, a governess, James, is not by no means a lady ; but his only a person hentitled to no manner of respects whatsomedever, except Christian charity, has one may say. Now you shall see how I receives this governess."

"Just so, Mrs. Jones ; you'll put her on her proper footing in no time."

"You shall see, James."

But Mrs. Jones did not know that there were spiritual hierarchies as dominant as were earthly ones, and that in

Laura Elmer's person lived the honor-compelling spirit of a queen.

She opened the door and bustled in, swinging herself from side to side, with all the insolence of a pampered menial, and was about to speak, when Laura Elmer raised her stately head, and fixed her full, dark eyes upon the woman's face; whereupon the latter immediately, and quite involuntarily, dropped a courtesy, and, addressing Miss Elmer very respectfully, said :

"My lady has sent me to receive you, ma'am. Would you prefer to see your room before you take supper?"

"I thank you; you may show me to my apartment, and send me a cup of tea; that is all I shall require to-night," said Laura.

The housekeeper touched a bell, which was answered by a housemaid, to whom she said :

"Show Miss Elmer to the bed chamber adjoining the school-room, and take her up a cup of tea."

The girl brought a light, and requesting Miss Elmer to precede her, showed her the way from the library.

"There, James, you see with what self-respect and dignity *hi* treat the governess," said the housekeeper, just as soon as the restraining influence of Laura's presence was withdrawn.

"Can't say as I did, Mrs. Jones," said the footman, very drily.

"You seen, at least, *hi* kept her at a distance," said the housekeeper.

"I see you kept *yourself* at a respectful distance, just as I should, if any haccident was to throw me in the way of her majesty the queen."

"You're a himperent fellow, and *hi* shall report you to Sir Vincent !" exclaimed the housekeeper, in a fury, as, swinging herself from side to side, she brushed out of the room.

"Well ! governess or duchess, I could no more fail in respects to that young lady, than I could to Lady Lester herself. Leastways, when I'm in her presence; nor no more could you, Mrs. Jones, for all your swinging about of your hoops behind her back. Why, she's grander looking in her plain black dress, than all the peeresses in their velvets and

diamonds, as I saw hannounced in the drawing-room this hevening," was the acute criticism of the footman, James, as he returned to his post of service in the hall below.

Meanwhile, Laura Elmer was conducted by the housemaid to her apartment, next the school-room, in the third story.

"My lady appointed this floor as the apartments of the young ladies and their governess, upon account of its quiet and fresh air, and I am directed to wait on you and them, ma'am. Is there any thing I can bring you with your tea?" asked the maid, as she ushered Miss Elmer into the comfortably furnished and well lighted bed-room, where her luggage had already been brought.

"Nothing else, thank you. My good girl, what is your name?"

"Lizzy, ma'am."

"Nothing, then, Lizzy," said Miss Elmer, lying off her wrappings and bonnet, and throwing herself into an arm-chair before the bright fire.

And then the excitement that had sustained her through the long journey, subsided, now that it was over. There came a strong re-action, and she burst into a passion of tears; but not one thought was given to the loss of wealth or title; a commonplace woman might indeed have wept bitterly for the loss of these, but Laura Elmer could only weep for the greater bereavement of her heart.

"If he had been taken away from me by death, while I yet believed him to be true and noble, then, indeed, I could have borne it! I should have put on mourning, and lived through all my pilgrimage on earth a widowed maiden for his sake, waiting for that death which should re-unite us in eternal love. But now! but now! he is lost to me forever, in time and in eternity."

She dropped her face once more upon her hands, and sobbed as though the very fountains of her life were breaking up.

Thus bitterly she wept in her hour of weakness for the false-hearted traitor, caring nothing, knowing nothing of the true and noble heart who had secretly consecrated himself to her service, and who would gladly have shed his blood, drop by drop, to have saved her from shedding tears.

Not long did her weakness last. She dashed the sparkling drops from her eyes, murmuring :

“I must not give way to sorrow for the past. I must struggle through my life. I must not murmur at misfortune, but rather thank heaven for the blessings that are left. I have lost wealth, position, and my false love ; but I have left youth, health, intellect, and much acquired knowledge, with many accomplishments. These will always enable me to lead a useful life. How much more favored am I still than half my fellow-creatures ! I will grieve no more, but rather show my gratitude to Heaven by a cheerful industry in the station in life, which Providence has assigned me.”

She arose, bathed her eyes and smoothed her hair, and resumed her seat just as Lizzie entered with the tea-tray.

And after this slight refreshment, Laura Elmer dismissed her attendant and retired to bed. She could not sleep. The novelty of her position was enough to have disturbed her repose ; but this was not all. Accustomed all her life to the luxurious stillness of Swinburne Castle, where her own delicious sleeping-room was blind to light and deaf to sound, she found the noise of the London streets a perfect antidote to sleep. All night long there was the sound of carriages coming and going, as late guests arrived and early ones departed. At length when the day broke, and all the rest of the world woke to life, London became quiet.

Laura Elmer dropped asleep, and was visited by a singular dream or vision. First there was infused into her soul a delicious warmth and light, strengthening as soothing. She was again at Swinburne Castle. The beautiful and beloved home of her childhood and youth was bathed in the sunshine of a glorious summer's day. Many loving friends were around her, and by her side was one whose kingly countenance seemed strange, yet strangely familiar, and whom, in her dream, she loved with a passion as profound as it was elevated, as ardent as it was pure.

In his hand he held the coronet of her ancient house. This glittering diadem he placed upon her brow, saying :

“Hail, my beloved ! once more Laura, Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne !”

With the fulness of joy that this diadem inspired she awoke, and the beautiful vision fled. The vision fled, but not its beneficent effect. Charmed, strengthened, and elevated, she knew not wherefore, except through the influence of her dream, she arose and made her simple morning toilet—a plain black bombazine dress, and black crape collar. Her rich and abundant black hair, worn in plain bands, was her only head-dress. By the time she had completed her toilet, which, simple as it was, occupied her longer than usual, for she was quite unaccustomed to waiting upon herself, there came a gentle rap at the chamber door, and to her “Come in,” entered the little maid.

“Oh! I beg your pardon, ma’am, I thought you would want me to assist you,” said Lizzy; adding, “breakfast is quite ready.”

“Show me the way, then, child,” said Miss Elmer.

The maid conducted our heroine to a small sitting-room adjoining the school-room, where a table was laid for the morning meal.

“The young ladies and the governess take their meals here, ma’am, if you please.”

“And where are the young ladies?”

“If you please, ma’am, Mrs. Rachel will bring them directly.”

And even as the maid spoke, a respectable, middle-aged matron entered, leading two dark-eyed little girls, of about ten and twelve years, by the hand, whom she presented to the governess as Miss Lester and Miss Lucy Lester, adding:

“Now, my dears, this lady is your teacher. You will be very good, and not plague her as much as you did Miss Primrose.”

“But I hated Miss Primrose, nurse, and I shall hate this one, too; I know I shall,” said the elder child.

“For shame, Miss Lester! Go and speak to your governess as a young lady should,” said the nurse.

The children drew back, frowning and sulky; but Laura advanced towards them with outstretched hands, saying:

“I am very glad to see you, my dears, and I am sure you will like to stay with me.”

Her voice was so sweet, and her look so gracious and benignant, that the children readily met her offered hands, and smiles broke through their sulky faces, like sunshine through the clouds.

The elder one looked up shyly into her face, and said :

"I am sorry that I said any thing to offend you, ma'am ; but Miss Primrose was *such* a plague ! But I will please you."

"I hope so ; and now shall we go to breakfast?" said Laura, leading the little girl to the table.

The nurse had left the school-room, and now returned, leading in a boy of about eleven years old, saying :

"And here is Master Percy, if you please, ma'am. He is to be under your charge until his tutor arrives."

Once more Laura arose to meet the lad ; a fine, handsome, dark-eyed, frank-looking boy, who returned her cordial greeting with a look of real admiration, saying :

"I am a great boy to be in a lady's school-room, Miss Elmer ; but you will find me not at all unmanageable."

"Of that I am quite sure," replied the governess.

The boy joined the circle at the breakfast-table, where the children broke into a conversation, more remarkable for vivacity than for propriety.

Laura looked from one to another of her pupils, thinking within herself :

"Providence never intended me for a governess, for I feel not the slightest disposition towards curbing these children's fine spirits or checking their free conversation."

When breakfast was over, Miss Elmer took her pupils into the school-room and entered into a preliminary examination of their progress in their various studies. This occupied her the whole forenoon, and it was near two o'clock when a servant knocked at the door, and being admitted, brought the compliments of Lady Lester, with a request that Miss Elmer would come immediately to her ladyship's dressing-room.

With a mournful smile given to the memory of the past, when as Baroness Etheridge she herself received dependents in *her own* dressing-room, Laura Elmer arose, and attended by the footman who showed her the way, descended to the

second floor, upon which was situated the private apartments of Lady Lester. Laura was shown into a spacious dressing-room, with hangings of blue satin, and otherwise splendidly furnished, the walls being adorned with the choicest paintings, and the niches filled with the rarest statues, all original or copies of old masters. Many bouquets of the rarest exotics diffused a rich fragrance through the air. In the midst of this room stood a large Psyche mirror, and before it, in the softest of easy-chairs, reclined a fair, statuesque woman, arrayed in a graceful white dressing-gown of Indian muslin. At her side stood a small rosewood table with a breakfast service of gold plate, upon which stood the remains of a dainty breakfast. At the back of her ladyship's chair stood her French maid, engaged in combing out the long, luxuriant, light hair of her mistress.

The first thought of Laura Elmer on entering the room, was:

"Surely this young, fair, inane-looking woman cannot be the mother of those very vivacious and beautiful little brunettes in the school-room. She must be their step-mother and the baronet's second wife."

"Jeannette, tell the young person to come around here, where I can see her without having to turn my head," said her ladyship, addressing her *femme de chambre*.

Laura smilingly advanced and stood as she was desired, immediately before Lady Lester.

"You are the new governess that Sir Vincent engaged?" she inquired, without taking the trouble to lift her languid, snowy eyelids.

"Yes, madam," replied Laura.

"Your name is Miss Elmer?"

"It is, madam."

"Well, Miss Elmer, Sir Vincent desired me to see you this morning, though I am quite at a loss to know why," drawled her ladyship, languidly.

"Perhaps, madam, the baronet wished me to receive your instructions as to the best method of managing my pupils," suggested Laura.

"Oh, nurse Jones could tell you how to manage much better than I could. She understands their dispositions."

"It is probable, then, that Sir Vincent wished me to receive your ladyship's directions concerning the course of studies to be pursued by the young ladies?"

"Oh, then, he should have sent for you to the library, talked with you himself, for he is interested in all those matters, which only bore me."

All this time Laura Elmer had stood with her stately form drawn up, and her large, dark, starry eyes, looking steadily down upon the fair inanity before her.

"I am sure I cannot conceive why Sir Vincent should wish me to see you," said her ladyship, in a tone of vexation, and then, for the first time, raising her languid eyes to the face of the governess, she asked:

"Can you suggest any thing else?"

Then seeing, for the first time, that queenly form, and meeting, for the first time, that queenly spirit shining through the great, calm, luminous eyes, she instinctively bowed before it, and involuntarily said:

"I beg your pardon, Miss Elmer, for having kept you standing so long. Pray take a seat."

"I thank you, madam, but if your ladyship has really no commands for me, I will ask your permission to return to my charge."

"I really do not know that I have any thing to suggest to you, Miss Elmer. Yet now I think of it, I wish you to tell me, do they make you comfortable? I leave all these things to Jones."

"Quite comfortable, I thank you, madam."

"If you find there is any thing that you require for your comfort or your happiness, let Jones know; and if she neglects your orders, inform Sir Vincent. He has more energy than I have, and relieves me of all that sort of trouble."

"I thank your ladyship," Laura said. "There is nothing I require for my comfort; and, for my happiness, I fear it would be unjust to compel poor Jones to provide for that," she added, mentally.

Then bidding her ladyship good-morning, she retired from her presence.

In the outer hall, she found herself waylaid by another

footman, with Sir Vincent's respects to her, and a request that she would favor him with a few moments' conversation in the library.

Again Laura smiled to herself, thinking :

"If the baronet is no more alive to his paternal duties than her ladyship, this interview will be a mere form."

She was shown into the richly-furnished library, filled with the treasures of literature, science and art of two centuries of accumulation, and lighted by one tall, Gothic window of stained glass, that diffused "a dim, religious light" throughout the vast room. In a rich, antique chair, beside a writing-table, in the centre of the room, sat a tall, stout, very handsome man, aged about forty-five. Regular and well-chiselled features, dark gray eyes, heavy, black eyebrows, a large, well formed nose, and a full, handsome mouth, were all framed in by a luxuriant growth of shining black hair and whiskers.

On seeing Miss Elmer, he arose with a stately courtesy, and placed a chair for her, saying, as he handed her to her seat :

"I requested the favor of your company here, Miss Elmer, that I might consult with you upon the subject of your new pupils."

Laura bowed and waited his further speech.

"You have, I presume, just left Lady Lester?"

"Yes, Sir Vincent."

"The delicate constitution, and the numerous social responsibilities of her ladyship, prevent her from giving that attention to her children that she would otherwise."

The baronet paused. He seemed anxious to defend his wife's indifference to her children, yet unable to do so with truth. At length he said :

"You have seen your future pupils?"

"I have seen them."

"I hope, that notwithstanding their very neglected condition, you find them not unpromising subjects."

"Decidedly not. They seem to me to be unusually gifted, though somewhat undisciplined," said Laura, with a smile adding, "however, I should have informed you, sir, that I have

little experience in children, never having filled the situation of governess before."

The baronet looked up in surprise, then drawing towards him an open letter that lay upon the table, and referring to it, he said :

"Ah ! yes, Dr. Seymour has written 'that unforeseen reverses have placed Miss Elmer under the necessity of seeking a situation in life for which she was not brought up, yet, for which her moral and intellectual qualifications eminently fit her.' I must condole with your misfortunes, and at the same time I congratulate myself and my children, Miss Elmer."

Laura bowed, and remained silent.

The baronet then went over the list of studies that he wished his children to pursue, and in conclusion, said :

"I hope you will allow me to look into your school-room sometimes, Miss Elmer, to aid you by such counsels as my somewhat longer and more intimate acquaintance with your pupils might suggest," said the baronet, smiling.

"My inexperience will thank you, sir."

And seeing that the interview was closed, she was about to rise, when the door swung slowly open, and a figure glided in that immediately arrested her attention.

It was that of a young woman of about twenty years of age, who would have been beautiful but for the deathly pallor of her thin face, that looked still more ghastly white in contrast with the raven blackness of her hair, eyebrows, and large, wild eyes, and her dress of deep mourning.

The baronet started, changed countenance, and arose in haste and agitation, and advanced to meet her.

But she glided towards him, extending her thin, white arms, clasping her transparent hands, and fixing her wild, black eyes in an agony of supplication upon his face.

"Helen, why are you here ? What is this ?" he inquired, in a deep and smothered voice, as he took her hand, and led her, unresisting, from the room.

Feeling it to be impossible to follow them, Laura Elmer retained her seat for a few moments, at the end of which time the baronet re-entered the library, in a state of agitation almost frightful to behold. The veins of his forehead were

swollen out like blue cords, his nostrils were dilated and quivering, his lips grimly clenched, his cheeks highly flushed, his dark eyes contracted and glittering, his large frame shaking. He evidently struggled to suppress the exhibition of his emotions as he resumed his seat, and, trembling, dropped his face upon his hands.

Laura Elmer felt painfully the awkwardness of her position. It was impossible to speak to him, and nearly equally impossible to withdraw without doing so, while it seemed indelicate to remain and witness the strong emotions that he so evidently tried to conceal.

At length seeing him deeply absorbed in his own feelings, she softly arose, with the intention of gliding from the room, when the baronet, somehow perceiving her purpose, abruptly started forward, saying—"I beg your pardon, Miss Elmer," opened the door, and courteously held it open until she passed out.

Laura Elmer retraced her steps to the school-room.

As she entered she was warmly greeted by the smiles of her young charges, who assured her that they had conscientiously occupied the time of her absence in devotion to their studies.

"Not disinterested attention, I assure you, Miss Elmer, as we remember the old condition of, no lessons in the school-room, no drive out in the park," said Miss Lester.

Laura looked up inquiringly, and learned from the explanation that ensued, that the governess was always expected to take her pupils for a daily afternoon drive in the park, and that they were now quite ready to recite their lessons and prepare for their airing.

Laura Elmer felt no sort of objection to this arrangement, and as soon, therefore, as the lessons were faithfully despatched, the young ladies' carriage was ordered, and they drove out.

The park was, as usual at this hour of the day, filled with a brilliant crowd in open carriages, of every description, intermingled with gay and noble equestrian figures. Laura Elmer enjoyed her drive through the park even more than her pupils did since to her the scene was as new as it was interesting.

Presently—

"There is Ruthven," exclaimed Miss Lester, as a young gentleman, mounted on a spirited horse, rode up to the side of the carriage, and, lifting his hat, said :

"Well, young ladies, I hope you are enjoying your drive?"

"Excellently well. Miss Elmer, this is our elder brother, Ruthven," said Miss Lester.

The young gentleman, smiling at this very informal presentation, bowed, and hoped Miss Elmer was well, and not too much incommoded by his unmanageable sisters.

Miss Elmer re-assured Mr. Lester upon that point, and, in doing so, for the first time looked up at him.

He was a fine-looking young man very much like his father, having the same tall and well-proportioned frame, though much less stout than that of the baronet; and the same dark eyes, and heavy eyebrows, and regular features surrounded by jet black hair and whiskers, though his face was less full, and his countenance less mature, than that of the elder man. He rode beside the carriage, conversing gayly with his sisters, for some time, and then suddenly inquired :

"Is her ladyship out to-day?"

"I am sure I don't know. I have not seen mamma for a week," replied Miss Lester.

"And poor Helen?" inquired the young man, lowering his voice.

"Hush! for mercy's sake! you quite frighten me," replied his sister, in the same low tone, and with changing cheek, and trembling voice.

The young man sighed deeply, and murmuring inaudibly,

"Her name was banished from each ear,
Like words of wantonness and fear,

turned and rode sadly away.

A strange, terrified silence fell upon the little party, which lasted until they returned home. After an early tea and supper, Laura Elmer retired to bed. And thus ended the first day of her new phase of life.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MYSTERIOUS COMPANION.

Oh! not when hope is brightest
 Is all love's sweet enchantments known
 Oh! not when hearts are lightest
 Is true affection's fervor shewn:
 But when life's clouds o'ertake us,
 And the cold world is clothed in gloom,
 When summer friends forsake us,
 The rose of love is best in bloom —*Pringle.*

FERDINAND CASSINOVE took his way to Grosvenor-square, where he arrived at about mid-day. After sending in his card, he was invited to walk up into the library, and was immediately shown into the presence of Sir Vincent Lester, who arose courteously to receive him. Placing a chair for his visitor, he said:

"I answered your advertisement in the *Times*, Mr. Cassinove, inviting you to call upon me here, because I judge that a quicker and more satisfactory arrangement might be concluded in a personal interview than through an epistolary correspondence."

Ferdinand bowed in assent, and took the offered seat.

"Should we come to terms, Mr. Cassinove, your principal charge will be the education of my son Percy, a youth of some twelve years of age. You will also be required to give lessons in Greek and Latin to my two younger daughters. Can you undertake so much?" inquired the baronet.

"Certainly, Sir Vincent. The whole task is by no means a heavy one," said Ferdinand.

"I trust you will find it as light as you anticipate," answered the baronet, with a smile.

Cassinove bowed.

"The salary is fifty pounds per annum. I hope it meets your views."

"Abundantly, Sir Vincent," replied Ferdinand, to whom the salary offered seemed to be a very liberal one.

"I have now, therefore, only to introduce you to your

pupils, if you will be kind enough to accompany me to the school-room. James, go before and announce us," said the baronet, rising, and leading the way.

Upon entering the school-room, Miss Lester and Master Percy were found to be its only occupants.

"Where is your governess, my dears?" inquired their father.

"In the music-room, giving Lucy her music lessons, replied Miss Lester, and at the same time a sweet voice was heard rehearsing some simple melody.

The baronet presented their tutor to the young people.

Cassinove had scarcely greeted his pupils, when, raising his eyes, he stood face to face with the goddess of his worship—Laura Elmer.

The blood rushed to his brow, his strong frame trembled; he bowed low, to conceal the agitation he could not control.

"Miss Elmer, Mr. Cassinove, my son's new tutor," said the baronet.

"I have met Mr. Cassinove before," replied Laura, with a smile, as she offered her hand.

Ferdinand barely touched that white hand, bowing lowly over it as though it had been the hand of a queen. To him, indeed, she was ever a queen. In losing all her worldly glory, she had lost no single ray of that halo with which her noble womanhood was surrounded. Thus he bowed lowly over her hand as though it had been the hand of a queen.

"Ah, you have met before!" observed the baronet, glancing from the smiling face of Laura to the agitated countenance of Cassinove, in a tone, and with a look of slight vexation, as strange as it was certain.

Then recovering his usual air of calm and stately courtesy, he said:

"But we will not further trespass upon Miss Elmer," and bowing, led the way from the school-room back to the library.

It was arranged that the new tutor should come the next day, and enter upon his duties, and Ferdinand Cassinove returned to his humble lodgings to prepare for his change of residence.

He was full of delighted astonishment at meeting Miss

Elmer, joy at the certainty of being domesticated under the same roof with herself, and faith and hope that seemed to anticipate the slow progress of time, and see "the future in the instant." He felt sure that Fate smiled upon his worshipping heart. It had deprived Laura Elmer of all those external advantages that had formed an insuperable barrier between her as a patrician and him as a plebeian. Fate, at the last moment, had snatched her from the arms of a man incapable of appreciating and unworthy of possessing her, and had left her free to accept the holier love that she had inspired in the bosom of a purer worshipper. Fate had domesticated her under the same roof with himself; would not Fate complete her good work, and give him the heart of this woman whom he coveted as the end and object of his whole life's endeavors—as the richest gift in all the treasuries of fortune?

"But how pale she is! how much she has suffered!" thus ran his thoughts, "and most of all through the discovery of her lover's worthlessness. But she will not suffer long from that source. She knows now that her love was a grievous mistake, unfounded upon any really estimable qualities in her lover. And in Laura Elmer's soul, love cannot survive esteem—it is now the death-throes of her dying love that causes her all this suffering; when that misguided passion is dead, she will have peace. And meantime, I must be very patient and discreet; I must not let the secret worship of my heart be seen in any look or tone that may alarm her delicacy. And can I so control myself? I think so; for to be near her, and to see her dear eyes, to hear her dear voice every day, is such happiness, that having that, I can wait patiently for years until she can bear to listen, and I may dare to plead my love! Oh, Laura! Laura Elmer! in losing all that you have lost, if you could but estimate what you have gained! The single devotion of a heart that no malice of destiny can ever change, that will love you in poverty as in wealth, in illness as in health, in old age and infirmity as in youth and beauty, that will love you through all time, and through all eternity!"

Wrapped in these thoughts, Cassinove reached his humble lodgings, where he encountered a scene that soon put to flight all his beautiful day-dreams.

As he entered the small shop, he found Mrs. Russel wringing her hands in distress, and the two little children crying around her. The shelves were dismantled, and the drawers open and rifled.

"Why, what is the matter?" hastily inquired Cassinove, in surprise.

"Oh, Mr. Cassinove! Oh, sir!" was all that the sobbing woman could reply.

"What has occurred?" again inquired the young man.

"Oh, Mr. Cassinove! Oh, sir! and the rent due to-day!" cried the widow.

"Oh! it's an execution!" said the young man, in a tone of compassion.

"An execution? Lord, no, indeed, sir; if it were only *that*, I might have met the costs!"

"Then you have been robbed!" exclaimed Cassinove, in dismay.

"Robbed! oh, no, sir! if it were only a robbery, I could apply to the police, you know."

"Then, if it is neither an execution nor a robbery, what is it?" inquired Ferdinand, looking in consternation at the emptied shop.

"Oh, Mr. Cassinove. Oh, sir!" was still the only reply of the poor woman.

A dreadful suspicion occurred to Cassinove that the widow's stock had been seized by the police as stolen goods.

"Good Heaven, Mrs. Russel! You have not been so unfortunate as to have purchased your stock from smugglers, or any such illegal traders!" he exclaimed, in dismay.

"Oh! Lord bless your soul, no, sir! I deal only with respectable houses."

"Then, in the name of every thing inexplicable, if you have not been robbed, nor had your stock taken in execution, nor had it seized by the police as contraband—what is the cause of your loss?"

"Oh, Mr. Cassinove! oh, sir!" exclaimed the widow, putting her handkerchief to her eyes, and weeping vehemently.

"Don't cry, mother," here put in the boy Frank. "Indeed, we didn't know any better, he was such a *nice-looking* gentleman."

"Oh, yes, such a *very* nice-looking gentleman, mamma, with a nice rosy face and nice light hair; and he took me up in his arms, and kissed me," said little Emily.

"And he told me to give his love to you, and said that it was all right. And we thought it was all right, because he said so, and he was such a *very* nice-looking, smiling, pleasant-spoken gentleman."

"Right! right! oh!" sobbed the poor woman, in a paroxysm of indignation and grief

"If you will only explain to me what has happened, perhaps I may be able to serve you in some way," said the young man, compassionately.

"Oh! Mr. Cassinove, come into my room, and I will tell you what the children have told me," said Mrs. Russel, with a deep sigh, as she arose, shut and barred the shop door, and, followed by Cassinove and the two children, led the way into the back parlor. She handed a chair to the young man, and then seated herself with the children on each side of her, their heads laid together upon her lap, and her arms around them, as though she would gather and defend them against some impending peril.

"I will tell you as they told me, Mr. Cassinove," she said. "You must know that soon after you walked out this morning, I went out to market, leaving the shop in charge of Frank and Emily. Well, it seems that I had not been gone above five minutes, when a fly drove up, and a stranger alighted, and came into the shop, and inquired for me. First he asked:

"'Is this Mrs. Russel's shop?'"

"'Yes, sir,' replied the children

"'Mrs. Ruth Russel's?'"

"'Yes, sir,' they repeated.

"'And you are Frank?' inquired the man, addressing the boy.

"'Yes, sir,' replied my son.

"'And you, my pretty lass, are Emily?'"

"'Yes, sir,' answered the girl.

"'And where is your dear mother?'"

"'Gone to market, sir.'"

“ ‘Right! I thought she would have been back to meet me before this time, but it is all right,’ said the gentleman, smiling very sweetly, and adding, by way of interrogative :

“ ‘She is a good mother?’

“ ‘Oh, yes, sir, and we love her so dearly,’ said the children.

“ ‘And she sends you to school, and teaches you to say your prayers?’

“ ‘Oh, yes, sir.’

“ ‘That is right, my dears. Always mind your mother, and keep the commandments of your Maker; be sure to go to church, and never forget to say your prayers every day, and so you will be sure to go to heaven.’

“ ‘Yes, sir,’ said the children, who took the stranger to be a minister of the gospel.

“ ‘And now,’ said the stranger, ‘I must proceed to business. I am sorry your mother is not here to assist me, but I must do the best I can without her.’

“And the nice-looking man went behind the counter, and began to take down the goods.

“ ‘What are you doing, sir?’ inquired the children.

“ ‘Oh, my dears, it is all right; the trustees of the Orphan Asylum bought up all her stock for the poor orphans, to help your dear mother.’

“And so saying, the stranger continued to remove from the shelves rolls of silk and velvet that composed the most valuable part of the stock.

“When he had piled upon the counter as much as he could carry away, he quietly called the cabman and ordered him to assist in carrying the goods out, and packing them inside and on top of the fly.

“Lastly, he coolly emptied the till of all its contents, put them into his pocket, kissed Emily, shook hands with Frank, told the astonished children to give his love to their dear, good mother, and got into the fly and drove off—having stripped the shop of all things that were valuable,” concluded the widow.

Here both children burst into loud sobs again.

“He was such a nice-looking gentleman, with nice curly hair, and nice blue eyes, and rosy cheeks, and white teeth;

and he smiled so kindly, and spoke so pleasantly, and kissed me, and sent his love to ma ! I did not think *he* could be a bad man," wept little Emily.

"And he was dressed all in black, like a parson, and he gave us such good advice ; I am sure I thought it was all right," sobbed Franky.

"There ! I do not blame you, I am sure, poor children ! You are as unfortunate and as innocently so as your poor mother," said the widow, trying to soothe them, though weeping bitterly herself the while.

"Then it appears that, after all, you have been robbed, coolly robbed, in broad daylight, by a most daring villain ; and no time must be lost in setting the police upon his track," exclaimed Cassinove, starting up.

"Stay," said the widow, catching hold of his coat and stopping him. "I told you that it was not a robbery ; if it had been a simple robbery, I should have known what to do from the first. Besides, would *any* robber, even the most daring, have come and dismantled my shop in broad daylight ?"

"Then, in the name of Heaven, if not a robbery, *what* was it ? and, if not a robber, *who* was it that riddled your house in this manner ?" inquired Cassinove, in great astonishment.

The widow looked in his face with a sorrowful, deprecating gaze, but said nothing.

"Do you know the man ?" inquired Cassinove.

"Yes."

"Who is he ?"

"I dare not tell you. Oh ! Mr. Cassinove, there are troubles in this world of which one must never speak, upon which no eye but that of God must ever look. Mine is such a one as that. You came in and found my house made desolate and myself and children weeping in the midst of our ruin. It is not the first time such a disaster has visited me, and it may not be the last ; but if you had not come in and discovered our calamity, you never should have known it."

"But your business is for the present broken up. What can you do ? And now, can I help you ?"

"Ah, Mr. Cassinove, you could not help me unless you

could change the laws of the land. I and my children must leave this house with what haste we can, and seek safety in some obscure suburb. The greatest trouble is the unpaid rent. I fear the whole of my little household furniture will be stopped for that."

"Do you mean to say that your mysterious visitor swept the till of all your money?"

"Of every penny! and I have not a farthing, except a few shillings left from my marketing, and there are ten pounds rent due to-day."

Cassinove dropped his face into his hands and groaned. It was just at such times as these that he most bitterly felt his own poverty. At length he looked up and spoke:

"I have a few sovereigns—not as much as you want; but they are heartily at your service, Mrs. Russell, as far as they will go towards settling the rent."

"I thank you, Mr. Cassinove. Heaven forbid that I should ever take such an advantage of your generosity. But one thing I beg of you—to see the agent of my landlord and get a little time," said the widow, gratefully.

"And who is he, Mrs. Russel?"

"Mr. Noakes, the city agent of Sir Vincent Lester, who owns this block of buildings."

"Sir Vincent Lester! Oh, I shall be able to manage the affair easily!" exclaimed Cassinove, brightening up, for he immediately resolved to pledge his salary and services in security for the widow's rent. "So you may begin to pack up as soon as you please, while I go and seek an interview with Sir Vincent Lester," he concluded, seizing his hat, and hurrying away to escape the widow's fervent gratitude.

He hailed a fly, and drove immediately to Grosvenor-square, where he asked to be admitted to Sir Vincent upon particular business.

He was shown immediately to the library, where he found the baronet just where he had left him hours before, sitting reading at a centre-table. He advanced, bowed, apologized for his intrusion, and explained the nature of his errand.

He then offered to pledge his salary as security for the widow's rent, if she could be permitted to take away her

goods and indulged in a few months' time to make up the money to pay it.

The baronet smiled dubiously.

"Now what does a generous and romantic young man like yourself expect me to do in this case of the distressed widow? Doubtless you **expect** me to play the cold and cruel proprietor, who refuses to interfere, and refers you to his hard-hearted agent, who has private instructions to show no mercy to delinquent debtors. I shall do nothing of the sort. Occasionally I give myself the pleasure of disappointing people," he said; and, drawing towards him writing materials, he wrote a few lines on a piece of paper and handed it to Cassinove.

It was a receipt in full for the widow's rent.

"God bless and prosper you, sir!" burst impulsively from the lips of the young man as he read this release.

"God bless and prosper us all!" said the baronet, smiling and holding out his hand.

Cassinove seized and pressed it fervently, and then left the house, and hastened to carry the good news to Mrs. Russel.

He found the poor woman in the midst of her packing. He handed her the receipt, and explained to her that it was a free gift from Sir Vincent Lester.

Poor Mrs. Russel wept with gratitude. Cassinove then divided his little stock of money, and forced one half of it upon her as a loan.

The same afternoon Mrs. Russel found another little house in an obscure part of the city, to which, upon the next day, she removed.

Cassinove, who had remained helping her to the last, finally bade her adieu as he handed her into the cab that was to convey her and her children to their new home. Then he entered the fly that he had kept in waiting, and was driven to Grosvenor-square, to commence his new career as a private tutor.

He was received by the baronet, who courteously installed him in a spacious closet adjoining the library, that had been fitted up as a study for himself and his pupil.

He was informed that he should dine at two o'clock with Master Perry, the little ladies, and their governess; and that

this party were expected always to take their meals together in the sitting-room adjoining the little ladies' school-room.

Oh, joy! he would then be sure of meeting Laura Elmer at least three times a day. How much toil would he not be willing to undergo for the delight of seeing Laura Elmer thrice a day!

Accordingly, at two o'clock, they met at dinner. It was but a little party of five. Laura, the little girls, Cassinove, and Percy. No young gentleman first ordained and anxious for the credit of his cloth could have been more circumspect in manner, looks, and conversation than Ferdinand Cassinove.

And, as Laura Elmer observed him, his face appeared to her to be strangely intimate. She wondered where, and under what circumstances of extreme interest they could have been, that she had seen that noble face before. She recollected perfectly of having seen him at Swinburne Castle, in attendance upon Colonel Hastings; but that was not the scene that continued so vaguely, yet so persistently, haunting her imagination like some half-remembered dream. Suddenly the circumstances she was in search of flashed full upon her mind. It was the dream that she had had the first night she had slept in Lester House—the dream in which a man, bearing Cassinove's form and features, had been ever at her side, through scenes of transcendent beauty, brightness, and joy, and whose hand had at last replaced upon her brow the lost coronet of Swinburne. Laura Elmer, as she recollected this fantastic dream, smiled at the vagaries of imagination that had mixed up the personality of her guardian's amanuensis with the wild vision of a restless night, and she drew no auguries from it. She looked up again at the face to read there what it was that had caused it so to haunt her dreams; and, as she raised her eyes, she chanced to meet those of Cassinove fixed full upon her face. Both dropped their eyes, blushing deeply, as with a sudden consciousness; and soon after Miss Elmer gave the signal for rising from the table.

Cassinove and his pupil retired, and then the young ladies passed into the adjoining school-room.

Laura had scarcely seated herself among her pupils before

a servant appeared with a request from Sir Vincent that Miss Elmer would grant him a few minutes' conversation in the drawing-room.

Laura immediately arose and went thither. She found Sir Vincent pacing up and down the floor, with signs of serious disturbance upon his face and manner. He came immediately to meet her, took her hand, led her to a chair, and, seating himself near her, said, with much *empressment* :

"My dear Miss Elmer, I have taken the liberty of requesting your presence here to-day, for the purpose, with your kind permission, of making you a *confidante*, and asking you a favor."

Laura bowed and waited his further words.

"In your first interview with me, in this room, you must have observed a young lady of singular appearance, who came in for a moment and whom I met and led out again."

"Yes, sir, I observed her."

"Did you—I beg you will forgive the question, Miss Elmer—but did you notice any thing remarkable about this lady?" inquired the baronet with interest.

"I noticed her extreme pallor, which, perhaps, seemed so ghastly only in contrast to her jet black hair and eyes, and her black dress. I noticed, also, a deep melancholy, approaching despair, in the expression of her features, and a sort of restrained frenzy in her glances and motions. I saw her but an instant, but in that instant I will not deny that her appearance impressed me very deeply."

"Humph! humph!" muttered the baronet to himself, in a dubious tone, from which it was impossible to judge whether he approved or disapproved of the interest expressed by Miss Elmer in the person alluded to.

"Miss Elmer, your appearance and manner, no less than the high encomiums of my friend, Dr. Seymour, give me the greatest faith in your prudence and benevolence."

Laura bowed in silence.

The baronet seemed embarrassed, and doubted how to proceed.

At length he said :

"Her name is Mrs Ravenscroft. For important reasons

she lives in strict seclusion. Her home has hitherto been at Hurst Hall, our place in Yorkshire, but she has come up to town for a particular purpose. The seclusion that was desirable, even in the country, is quite indispensable for her in London, but she requires recreation, air, and gentle exercise, and she must take this in company of some proper companion, whose society and conversation will be her security. For she must be kept from all other pupils. This, Miss Elmer, is the confidence I had to repose in you. The favor I have to ask is, that you will be so kind as to take two hours daily, not from your own time, but from the school-room, and become the companion of this unhappy young woman in her drives."

The baronet ceased, and Laura Elmer prepared to reply. The "confidence" that he had professed to give her was but a half confidence at the best. Who was Mrs. Ravenscroft? What were her relations with Sir Vincent and his family? What was the nature of her unhappiness—guilt or misfortune? And what was the reason for her strict seclusion? These were mysteries which Laura Elmer felt should have been elucidated before she should have been requested to become the companion of Helen Ravenscroft.

"You are silent, Miss Elmer. I am well aware that the service I venture to ask of you is a very important one. If you feel any reluctance to undertake it, pray do not hesitate to say so," said the baronet, gently.

"I only wished to reflect for a few moments whether I could, with propriety, accept the charge you would honor me with. I will at least drive out with the lady this afternoon, when I shall then be better able to judge."

"I thank you more than you can imagine, Miss Elmer," said the baronet; and in the fervor of his gratitude he would have raised the hand of Laura to his lips, but that she coldly withdrew it, saying that she would go and prepare for her drive.

Sir Vincent held the door open for her to pass out. She paused one moment upon the threshold, and said—

"I have been in the habit of driving out daily with the young ladies; shall they join us in our drive this afternoon?"

"*By no means*," said the baronet, hastily, and with great emphasis; "*by no means*. They must forego the airing to-day, and after this, should you kindly continue to take charge of Helen in her hours of recreation, why, other arrangements must be made for them."

Laura Elmer less satisfied than ever, bowed slightly, and withdrew.

She returned to her school-room, dismissed her pupils for the day, and then went to her own room to put on her bonnet and shawl for the drive. She had scarcely drawn on her gloves, when Lizzie, the little ladies' maid, came to her door with Sir Vincent's compliments, and the carriage was waiting.

Laura Elmer went down to the front hall, in which she found Sir Vincent with a lady, clothed in black and closely veiled, leaning upon his arm.

When Laura came quite near, he went through a slight presentation, merely saying, in a very low tone:

"Mrs. Ravenscroft, Miss Elmer."

Laura courtesied, and was about to offer her hand, when the lady, without raising her veil, gravely bowed, and immediately averted her head.

Sir Vincent then led her out, and placed her in a carriage. He then returned to Laura, handed her into a seat beside Mrs. Ravenscroft, and told the coachman to drive to the park. As the baronet disappeared within, and as Laura was settling herself in the carriage, she observed a gentleman on horseback emerge from around the corner, glance inquisitively at the occupant of the carriage, and then, as though unwilling to be discovered, retreat behind the angle of the house.

She had twice before noticed this individual loitering near the entrance of Lester House. And now his appearance the third time, and seemingly with the same purpose of espionage, filled her mind with vague surmises, which were, however, unmixed with misgivings, for certainly there was nothing whatever sinister in the appearance of this man.

He seemed to be about twenty-eight or thirty years of age, with a tall and elegant figure, a fine head, covered with shining, light yellow hair, that fell in clustering curls around a forehead white, smooth, and round as that of childhood; his

features were delicate and regular, his eyebrows softly traced, his eyes blue, clear, and gentle in their gaze, his nose straight, lips and chin moulded into the very ideal of sweetness and benevolence. Frankness, affection, and gay, good humor were blended in the habitual expression of this captivating countenance.

So Laura Elmer felt no misgiving at seeing this gentleman, for the third time, loitering near Lester House. His motives and purposes might be eccentric ; but could not, with such a face as that, be evil.

The carriage drove on, and in due time turned into the park. It was, as usual, thronged with visitors in carriages, on horseback, and on foot.

The lady by Laura's side had not once raised her veil or spoken a word ; and Laura herself was too much absorbed in thought to break her companion's reverie until they had reached the park, when, thinking it well to engage the unhappy lady in conversation, she said—

"There is quite a numerous assemblage of visitors here to-day. Will you not throw aside your veil, and look out ?"

"No, no ; but you may let down the windows, please, the air is stifling," replied the lady, in a low voice.

Laura opened the windows, and the carriage wound slowly around one of the most beautiful and secluded avenues of the park. They had left the gay throng of fashionable visitors behind, and had reached a quarter frequented by nurse-maids and young children.

"See," said Laura, "we have reached a very quiet part now ; will you not raise your veil, and breathe some of this delicious air ?"

The lady put aside her veil, revealing again that face of ghastly pallor, with its bloodless lips, wild black eyes, and shadowy black tresses.

"See ! observe these various groups of little children as they pass ; how much marked individuality there is even in these little people ; their very looks and manners tell their characters and histories. These, now, are the children of some wealthy citizen, with their pampered nurse—observe the children, all flounces and sashes, hats and feathers—and see

the consequential air of their over-dressed attendant," said Laura, wishing to while her companion from her sorrowful thoughts.

The pale woman looked languidly forth, but neither the pomposity of the nurse, nor the vanity of the babies, could bring one smile to those sad lips.

"Yet, look again," said Laura. "There is quite a different group; there is some poor young widow who has left her occupation to bring her little boy and girl out for an hour's airing."

Mrs. Ravenscroft looked out, and seemed more interested in this little group. Her eyes became riveted to the two children, and, like the flame of an expiring candle, the light and color flickering in and out from her usually death-like face. At last her fixed regard attracted the attention of the boy, who exclaimed, as he pulled his mother's sleeve:

"Oh, mother! see that beautiful, pale lady! how she looks at us!"

The young widow turned to look, when her attention was immediately recalled by the little girl, who, starting forward and pointing eagerly, exclaimed:

"Mother, mother! Here! Here is the very man that took away all your stock."

The excitement and vehemence of the child drew all eyes to follow the direction of her outstretched finger.

The widow started, and turned deadly pale.

Laura Elmer followed the index of the child, and to her surprise, saw the same man who had watched them from the corner of Lester House. He was still on horseback, and had evidently followed their carriage to the park. He had now reined up his horse in a line with the side-windows of the carriage, but at a few yards distance, where he remained calmly upon the watch.

Before Laura could form a conjecture upon the circumstance, she was startled by a shriek from her companion.

She turned quickly round, but Helen Ravenscroft had already darted to the open window, from which she leaned, with her wild eyes fixed, and her thin white arms and clasped hands extended towards the horseman, and her piercing voice, calling in an agony of supplication:

“Rayburne ! Rayburne ! Rayburne ! Rayburne !”

The thrilling anguish of those tones could never be described and never be forgotten.

The horseman smiled and held out his arms.

A wild cry of joy burst from the lips of Helen, as she tried to break open the carriage door. But Laura threw her arms around the form of the excited woman, and forced her back into her seat, where her resistance suddenly ceased, and she sank in a swoon.

Laura was greatly shocked. She stopped the carriage, and began to bathe the hands and face of the fainting woman with some Hungary water that she happened to have at hand. While thus anxiously engaged in trying to restore consciousness to her charge, she heard her own name softly called, and looking up, she saw Ferdinand Cassinove and young Percy Lester standing beside the carriage window.

“I beg your pardon, Miss Elmer, but my young friend Percy here recognized your carriage, and insisted on coming up. We were taking a walk through the park. Your companion seems to be ill. Can I be of any service?” said the tutor.

“Oh, Mr. Cassinove, I am so glad that you are here ! Yet I do not know how you can assist me either,” said Laura, suddenly recollecting Sir Vincent’s orders that Mrs. Ravenscroft was to be seen by no one ; yet greatly perplexed to know how she should get home with her strange charge, should the latter, upon her recovery, again become unmanageable.

“The lady has fainted ! Let me assist you,” eagerly pleaded Cassinove, attempting to open the carriage door.

“No, no ; she is recovering now, and you must leave us, if you please, Mr. Cassinove ; but first tell me how much of this strange scene have you witnessed ?”

“The whole of it. Percy and myself were walking in the park, as I said. He recognized your carriage, and we were coming towards it, when I happened to see my landlady with her two children ; I saw the little girl start forward, with an exclamation that drew every one’s attention, mine among the rest, towards a certain horseman, a light-haired gentleman, in

whom those children had painful cause to be interested ; and I saw the frantic gestures and heard the wild cries of your friend before she fainted. And now, as you will not permit me to assist you in any way, I shall go in search of that mysterious light-haired Adonis, with whom also I have an account to settle on behalf of the widow and her orphans. So ! I shall see before night, whether, despite his very prepossessing appearance, and fascinating manner, I cannot bring him to the intimate acquaintance of the magistrates," said young Cassinove, bowing and retiring. And lifting his hat, he bowed deeply, and walked rapidly away.

Laura Elmer then gave her exclusive attention to her patient, who had now recovered sufficiently to enable her to sit up and breathe freely.

Helen Ravenscroft looked around, with a bewildered gaze, and, as memory seemed to return to her, sigh after sigh burst from her bosom.

Laura gave orders to the coachman to drive home.

" I hope you feel better," she said, in a gentle voice, turning to her strange companion.

" Better, better ! yes, I should be better in my grave ! Oh, for that dreamless sleep ! Ah, why does death seize the loved and the happy from all the blessings of life, and leave the desolate and wretched to all its curses !" cried Helen, in the same piercing tones of anguish with which she had spoken to the stranger.

" You are very young to speak so hopelessly of life," said Laura, soothingly.

" Young, am I ? That is the very worst of it—young, and hopeless, with no refuge but the grave, and that so distant !"

" No, I cannot agree with you ; you are morbid ; whatever your sorrows may be, time, the consoler, can cure them ; your youth is in your favor ; the long years you have yet to live are full of bright possibilities, as every one's future is, if they will but believe it, bright possibilities that your own will may turn to glorious certainties."

Helen shook her head despairingly, crying :

" Oh, no ! no ! You know not of whom you speak when you apply those words to me. Suppose a victim, sentenced

to death, bound upon the dreadful wheel, and at every turn his bones are crushed, and his blood flows, he knows that the tortured body will never be unbound until life is extinct—is not his only hope, his only wish, his only possibility of rest—death? Thus it is with me. Despair is the dreadful wheel to which I am bound; for life to me is one long, long pain, from which there can be no ease but in death—no hope but in the grave.”

“I am deeply grieved to hear you say so. I would that I could comfort you in some way.”

Helen shook her head hopelessly.

“May I venture to ask you to confide in me? It is sometimes a great relief to open one’s heart to a friend; and indeed I wish to be yours,” said Laura, taking the thin, white hand of the poor girl in her own.

But still Helen shook her head in that most despairing manner.

“Can I serve you in no way, Mrs. Ravenscroft?” pleaded Laura.

“In no way but one: conceal from Sir Vincent the circumstance of my meeting——”

She was unable to pronounce the name; her voice that had been faltering, now utterly sank, and she broke into a passion of tears and sobs.

Laura drew the poor head down upon her own bosom, and with tender words and caresses sought to soothe this inexplicable sorrow.

At length Helen lifted her pale face, and softly inquired:

“Will you promise me this?”

“Promise you *what*, dear?”

“Never to speak of the event that caused my swoon in the park?”

Laura hesitated. She felt herself in a position of trust towards this unhappy young lady, and accountable for her safety and welfare to Sir Vincent Lester, who seemed to be her only protector. And the incident in the park, she thought, ought certainly to be made known to some one acquainted with the antecedents of Mrs. Ravenscroft, interested in her welfare, and able to judge of the possible effect of that strange meeting upon her happiness

"You do not speak! Oh! do not betray me. I have no friend in the whole world—not even one!" said Helen, clasping her hands earnestly.

"Is not Sir Vincent Lester your friend?" inquired Laura.

"Yes! Sir Vincent would bless the day that laid me in my early grave—he is so much friend as that; for so, indeed, would I. But, oh! you do not answer me. Ah, do not betray me! On earth I have not one single friend—oh! let me not find a spy."

"A spy!" Laura's fine face flushed; could her compassionate attendance upon this unhappy lady be construed into espionage, a course of conduct hateful to her noble spirit?

"Dear Mrs. Ravenscroft," she said, looking calmly into the wild and troubled eyes of her companion, and modulating her voice to its utmost tenderness, "whatever the unknown cause of your sorrow may be, believe me, I sympathize with you from my soul. I will serve you to the extent of my power; and I will never reveal the incident of this afternoon, unless I should be convinced that your own safety and welfare required it."

Helen Ravenscroft caught and kissed the hand that was extended to her in pledge of the speaker's sincerity, and then she drew her black veil across her face, and relapsed into silence, which lasted until they reached Lester House.

Sir Vincent Lester met them in the hall, thanked Miss Elmer for her kindness, and took the hand of Mrs. Ravenscroft, and hoping that she had enjoyed the drive, he led her away.

That same evening, after tea, Laura Elmer was alone in the sitting-room, used in common by the governess and her pupils, when there came a knock at the door, and to her gentle "Come in," entered Ferdinand Cassinove.

"I pray you will forgive this intrusion, and grant me a few moments conversation, Miss Elmer," he said.

"Certainly, Mr. Cassinove," replied Laura, inviting him to be seated.

He took the offered chair, and said:

"I wish to speak to you, Miss Elmer, in regard to the appearance of that strange man, who caused so much consterna-

tion to your friend, as well as to my unfortunate landlady and her children. Forgive the question, but do you know any thing of him?"

"Nothing whatever, Mr. Cassinove, except that I have three times seen him lingering about the vicinity of Lester House, and that to-day he certainly followed our carriage from this house to the park."

"Did he attempt to speak to any one in your carriage?"

"No, not once. He kept out of our sight even until the moment that every one's attention was called to him by the exclamation of the little girl."

"Little Emily Russel?"

"Yes."

"It is most singular. You do not even know his name?"

"No."

"Nor suspect who he may be?"

"No."

"It is perfectly unaccountable. The unhappy lady in your carriage, who swooned at the sight of this strange man, called him Rayburne, I think?"

"Yes," replied Laura, hearing again in imagination those piercing cries of anguish—"Rayburne! Rayburne! Rayburne!"

"And—pray forgive my inquisitiveness, I have an excellent reason for it, which I will soon explain—the lady gave you no explanation of her own painful interest in this man?"

"None whatever. I know no more than yourself."

"Possibly not so much, Miss Elmer. And now I will give you my reasons for taking so deep an interest in the discovery of this man. The little woman in black, with the two children, was my landlady, a widow, who kept a little trimming-shop in Berkeley street. A few days ago, during her absence, and while the shop was left in charge of the two children, this very man, whom they recognized, came in a cab in broad daylight, and removed the most valuable part of the widow's little stock, telling the simple children that he had already purchased it for the Orphan Asylum. The most singular feature in the whole case is, that the widow, even in her great trouble, refuses to seek legal redress, without assigning any reason for her strange forbearance. She would even have made me

promise not to endeavor to find him out, but I informed her that it was the duty of every honest man of the community to protect the innocent and prosecute the guilty. Your young friend who was so dreadfully agitated by the appearance of this man could afford some clue to his identity if she would. Can you not serve the cause of justice by inducing her to do so?"

"Alas, no! for she not only refused to give me any explanation of the cause of her agitation, but she even wrung from me a conditional promise not to inform Sir Vincent of her accidental encounter with this man. A very improper promise, I fear."

"A promise to be regretted, I doubt."

"You came here to seek counsel of me, Mr. Cassinove, and you find yourself under the necessity of giving advice. What, therefore, had I better do? But for pity I should resign my charge of this young lady; for I do not like the position of a spy, or the responsibility of keeping dangerous secrets; and one of these alternatives will be forced upon me as long as I continue to be the occasional companion of Helen Ravenscroft. What, therefore, had I better do?"

"What your own heart prompts you to do, Miss Elmer; not to abandon her, but to keep her secret so long as you can do so without injury to her. If you should see this man again, give me the earliest intimation of the fact. I have already lodged an accusation against him, with a description of his person, and with the single name Rayburne, that I happened to hear. And now, Miss Elmer, I thank you fervently for these few moments of your conversation, and will detain you no longer from your pleasant avocations," said young Cassinove, glancing half jealously at a volume of Dante, in the original Italian, that lay open upon the table, and towards which the eyes of Laura Elmer had once or twice wandered.

She arose and gently bowed him out, and resumed her reading of Dante. Cassinove went to his own den, and passed the evening among those dry law-books that he had chosen for the study of his leisure hours.

From this day, for several weeks, no more was seen or

heard of the mysterious "light-haired stranger," whose appearance had caused so much disturbance.

Life went on, at Lester House, in a monotonous routine.

Sir Vincent spent his days reading and writing in the library, and his nights at the House of Commons. What hours he took for sleep only his valet knew.

Lady Lester passed her mornings in bed, and her evenings at some fashionable rout, play, or opera.

Laura Elmer employed the forenoon with the education of her pupils, and the afternoon in driving out with Mrs. Ravenscroft, whom she never chanced to see or even to here of at any other time, always meeting and parting with her at the carriage door. The evenings, Laura's only time of recreation, were spent in reading and writing in the little sitting-room.

Ferdinand Cassinove passed the morning in the study with his pupils, the afternoon in a stroll through the park, and the evening among the law-books in his own little room in the fourth story of Lester House. He met Laura Elmer only at meal times, or for an hour in the school-room twice a week, when he gave her pupils lessons in Latin and Greek.

CHAPTER XIV.

MORE MYSTERIES.

False friends, like insects of a summer's day,
Bask in the sunshine, but avoid the shower—
Uncertain visitants, they flee away,
Soon as misfortunes's cloud begins to lower.
Into life's bitter cups true friendship drops
Balsamic sweets to overpower the gall—
True friends, like ivy and the wall it props,
Both stand together, or together fall.—*F. Skurry.*

LIGHT came back to the dark eyes, and color to the pale cheeks of Laura Elmer. Some new spring of life-warmth and inspiration seemed opened in her soul. There were few in that large household that cared to observe the looks of the

governess, else they must have seen the change that was coming over her countenance; the spiritual beauty that at once softened and irradiated her noble features, gave a sweeter, clearer tone to her rich, deep voice, and a more elastic grace to all her stately motions. She seemed, indeed, as one who had found, at last,

The secret of some happy dream,
She did not care to tell.

She seemed to have discovered, within the depths of her own spirit, the secret of an infinite content. For all the ends of earthly happiness she appeared to be sufficient unto herself, as one whose treasures were all within, safe from external vicissitudes, independent of exterior circumstances.

Indeed, there was little in her outer life to strengthen, comfort, or cheer her. She saw no company, went to no places of amusement, had no congenial friends. Her mornings were passed in the school-room and music-room with her young pupils; her afternoons in driving out with Mrs. Ravenscroft, who had lapsed into silent reserve; and her evenings in the solitude of her own room, where she occupied her time in reading and writing.

Only at meal times, and in the presence of her pupils, she met Mr. Cassinove and his young charge, Master Lester.

She had not seen Lady Lester once since the interview in her ladyship's dressing-room.

Sir Vincent Lester frequently visited the school-room, and often sent to request the presence of Miss Elmer in the library.

And it might have been observed that the only occasions upon which Miss Elmer's clear brow was clouded were those of the baronet's visits to the school-room, or her own enforced attendance in the library.

Children frequently see and hear every thing without understanding any thing. They saw their father's solicitous attention to all their governess's needs and comforts, his readiness to serve her with advice or assistance, his unvarying kindness in every word and deed, and they saw the reserve with which Miss Elmer received all absolutely necessary attentions, and the coldness with which she repelled all others.

"I do think Miss Elmer is less than grateful to our papa; he is as kind to her as ever he can be; he never was half so good to any governess we ever had before. I am sure, I do not think he ever spoke three words to Miss Primrose in his life, and as for Mademoiselle Bellejour, I do not think he even knew her by sight! And, here, since Miss Elmer has been with us, he visits the school-room every day to see how we get on, and whether he can assist her. And she answers him as coldly as possible, and without ever looking at him! I think she is very unthankful!" said Miss Lester.

"So do I!" chimed in little Lucy; "because whenever I want any thing, I have only to tell papa Miss Elmer says I ought to have it, and I get it. Now, I *did* want a pony so badly, and pa would never let me have one, you know! Well, so yesterday, I said to Miss Elmer—'Don't you think I ought to have a little pony?' and she said, 'Yes, dear.' And so I went to pa, and said, 'Papa, dear, Miss Elmer says I really ought to have a pony, and learn to ride.' And he said, 'Did Miss Elmer say so?' and I told him, 'Yes.' And he said, I should have one. And, now, when you want any thing, you can get it in the same way."

"Not if Miss Elmer continues to treat papa with so much coldness, because he will get tired of being good to such an ungrateful person. She is *really* rude to him. I am sure I do not see why she should treat him so," said Miss Lester.

The entrance of their governess put a stop to this conversation.

And, indeed, if Laura Elmer had been upon oath, and forced to give an answer to the question, why she doubted, feared, and disliked Sir Vincent Lester, she would not have given a satisfactory reason. He was a very handsome, dignified, and graceful gentleman, of a highly-cultivated intellect, highly-polished address, and an unblemished character and reputation. In his manners to Miss Elmer, as to all others, there was nothing to which even the most fastidious could take exception. And yet Laura Elmer, usually so thankful for all true kindness, felt towards Sir Vincent not only ingratitude, but resentment and distrust, which she could neither understand nor control. And as I said, the only

occasions upon which her clear brow was clouded were those of the visits of Sir Vincent to the school-room, or of her own required attendance in the library.

Laura Elmer kept up her correspondence with her old pastor, Dr. Seymour, and through him heard frequently of Rose, who, as her prospects brightened, and her position settled into stability, was zealously courted by the old country families. The worthy rector gave the most satisfactory account of her improvement, admitting, however, that she had the advantage of an excellent plain education as a foundation upon which to raise a superstructure of graceful accomplishments.

It was near the commencement of the fashionable season in London that Laura Elmer received a letter from Rose herself. It was brought to her in the evening mail, and placed in her hands while she sat alone, employed in writing, in the sitting-room. Laura observed with a smile the coronet and arms of Etheridge upon the seal. She opened the missive and read:

"Swinburne Castle, January 8th, 18—.

"MY DEAREST MISS ELMER:—I am so weary of waiting for a letter to give me permission to write to you that at length I presume to take the initiative, and commence the correspondence, though, indeed, I have been writing to you in thought ever since you left this place. You may thank Heaven, Miss Elmer, that it was only in thought, for, if I had put upon paper one-half of what I have said to you in fancy, you could not have found time to read, or space to stow my epistles. One-half my time I find myself apologizing to heaven and earth for accepting the strange elevation to which you have raised me, and the other half I am doubting the evidence of my own senses concerning this.

"Often of an evening, sitting alone before the fire in the vast, sombre library, with the literature of centuries piled up around me the portraits of the grim old barons frowning down upon me, and the twilight deepening around me, with no familiar sight or sound connected with my former life near me, I fall into a deep and painful reverie, in which I doubt the reality of all my present strange surroundings, and won-

der whether I am not really lying in my little bed, in the attic of my mother's cottage, ill of some dangerous brain-fever, and whether all this drama of Swinburne Castle, with its towers and keep, its abbey, church, and park, and chase, and its retinue of servants, with all the attendant circumstances of my sudden elevation, is not the mere phantasmagoria of a delirious brain, while my reason lies imprisoned in a crust of unconsciousness to all the real circumstances of my cottage home and my mother's presence. And I long to break the spell, to cry out with a cry that shall burst through the barrier of insensibility and delirium, and place me again in communion with the realities of life; for the sternest reality is safer than the most flattering dream.

"And even when my mind is clearest and strongest, this, my present life, is very like a dream—as airy, transient, and unreal as any vision of the night! It cannot last, Miss Elmer. Of that I am calmly and soberly certain; for I feel that I am no more Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne than I am Empress of Russia. There is nothing real, substantial, and permanent in my present position. I am only a silly little puppet, dressed up as a baroness by the caprice of fortune, or a figure in a masquerade that must soon be over, or a poor player peeress, who must 'fret her hour upon the stage' until the play is done, and then 'be seen no more.'

"I think of Lady Jane Grey, poor thing, who for ten glorious days played her great *rôle* as Queen of England, and then laid down her life in payment of that royal drama, and I wonder what fearful compensation Fate will exact from me for daring to take upon myself for a season the part of a peeress. We shall see!

"There are those in the neighborhood, however, Miss Elmer, who would make me discard all these doubts, and believe myself a baroness in reality.

"Among the county aristocracy who have run the risk of taking me up before the House of Lords shall have decided upon my case, the most important is the Duchess of Beresleigh, of Beresleigh Court. You knew, of course, that the late duke occupied a distinguished diplomatic position on the continent. He died at Berlin about two years ago; but the family

remained abroad for the health of their income, I am told, until this winter, when they have all returned to Beresleigh Court. The family consists of the duchess, the young duke, and his sisters, the ladies Katharine, Matilda, and Annie Wardour; they are all excessively kind to me. The duchess has made me promise that after the House of Lords shall have decided upon my case, I will accompany her to London, and remain her guest at Beresleigh House, for the whole of the season. She undertakes to become my *chaperone* in society, and to present me to their Majesties.

“But now, my dearest Miss Elmer, what do you suppose to be the greatest pleasure to which I look forward in coming to town? Can you not guess? It is the meeting with my best beloved and most esteemed Miss Elmer.

“And now I have a favor to ask of you. There has been a new poem called ‘Woman,’ written by an anonymous writer, and reviewed in all the principal journals of the day. I have read the reviews, with many extracts from that beautiful work; yet these slight tastes have only stimulated my mental appetite for a feast of the whole volume. The reviewers, as you see, are lost in conjecture as to the authorship of the poem, and even the sex of the author; some ascribing it to a man and some to a woman. The duke, who has a highly cultivated taste, and a very discriminating judgment, sums up his criticism in these words: ‘It is written with masculine power, yet no man could have written it.’ Miss Elmer, if you have read this poem, you will forgive me for talking so much about it. If you have not read it, get the volume, and you will not blame me. Please write soon, and tell me about yourself, for all that affects you, interests your faithfully affectionate,
ROSAMOND ETHERIDGE.”

After perusing this letter, Laura Elmer sat holding it open in her hand, with her smiling eyes fixed upon vacancy, murmuring—

“It is understood; it has reached one heart and soul at least; one, too, through whom its influence for good may flow to benefit a thousand others.”

While she sat in this happy dreaming reverie, there was a gentle knock at the door.

Believing it to come from one of her pupils, she bade the visitor enter, and, looking up, beheld to her surprise the master of the house.

The baronet had never before intruded into this apartment. With a sudden flush upon her cheek, Laura arose to meet him.

The baronet was a man who could do an essentially rude thing in the most refined manner, paradoxical as it may seem. Bowing, and waving his hand in the most courteous manner, and modulating his voice to the lowest and sweetest key, he said—

“Forgive my intrusion, Miss Elmer, and pray resume your seat.”

But Laura remained standing, with her hand resting upon the table, lest, if she sat down, Sir Vincent should feel at liberty to follow her example. He had tact enough to understand her, and advancing to the table, he said :

“I should not have ventured to intrude upon you, Miss Elmer, but that I have brought with me my apology. Here is a new work that is attracting much attention in the literary world—a poem by an unknown author. I have perused it with much deeper feelings than those of admiration. I know of none who could appreciate and enjoy this beautiful creation of poetic genius more thoroughly than yourself.”

Laura Elmer bowed coldly in reply to this compliment.

“I hope you will do me the favor of using this copy ; it is full of my marks, but I trust that it will not be very much less acceptable or interesting on that account,” continued the baronet, quite unconscious of the covert vanity betrayed in this sentence.

“Sir Vincent Lester’s literary taste is indisputable,” replied Laura.

He then placed the volume in her hand, with a scarcely perceptible pressure, accompanied with a scarcely audible sigh, bowed, and withdrew.

Laura Elmer’s happy reverie was over for that evening. A frown corrugated the usual noble calmness of her brow, as, standing where he had left her, she conferred with herself :

“What can that man mean? Kindness, perhaps, and only

simple kindness, to a friendless girl. It is ungrateful, unjust, and absurd to think otherwise, and yet I should be happier and more comfortable if Sir Vincent Lester would interest himself much less in my comfort and happiness. For though reason can find no positive cause of offence, yet instinct teaches me to dread these attentions. I will for once disregard fallible reason, and be guided by unerring instinct. I will obey no more summonses to the library, and since this room is not free from intrusion, I will henceforth spend my evenings in my own private apartment."

So saying, Laura Elmer sat down and opened the volume that she had very reluctantly accepted, and only because she had no civil pretext for declining it.

In looking over the poem she was less pleased than surprised to find that those passages which most deeply interested her own sympathies were the very ones most emphatically marked by the admiration of Sir Vincent Lester.

"It is strange and sorrowful to think that a mind like Sir Vincent Lester's, capable of feeling and appreciating the true and beautiful in nature and art, should be so thoroughly destitute of veneration for the Creator of nature and the Inspirer of art," thought Laura to herself, as she sank into a pensive revery.

Meanwhile Sir Vincent Lester regained the solitude of his usual retreat in the library. He walked up and down the floor in disturbed thought, murmuring :

"I have forgotten myself. My hand closed upon hers with a convulsive grasp, and my strong emotion broke forth in an irrepressible sigh. I have alarmed her, I who meant to have approached her only in the gentle guise of friendship—aye, and never to have gone farther than friendship if I could have helped it. With the friendship, confidence, and companionship of this large-hearted, high-souled woman, I think I could be happy, would she but give me so much. I, at forty-five, have never known the love of woman. Lady Lester married me for my rank, which she knows how to wear, and for my money, which she knows how to spend. She never sympathized with any of my tastes and pursuits, never cared for the well-being of our own children; never,

in one word, loved either me or them, being as incapable of love as she is of thought. Her brain and heart seem to have no other functions than to regulate the action of her calm, nervous system, and the circulation of her cool blood—her life no higher object than to be thought the fairest and the best dressed woman at the ball or opera. I scarcely ever see her ladyship, and when I do I have nothing to say to her, or, if I have, she does not understand me! If we met often we should be dreadful bores to each other, that is certain. How different with this beautiful Laura Elmer; for beautiful, indeed, she is to me, with her graceful form and fine features? I could gaze forever with renewed delight upon that calm, queenly brow, those large, lustrous, dark eyes, and pensive lips. All day long I devise excuses to see her in the school-room, or to summon her here; and the few transient moments that I spend in her society seem worth all the days and hours I employ in manœuvring for them. Well, and what are my ‘intentions?’ as the dowagers would say. I know not beyond the present one of enjoying as much of Miss Elmer’s society as I possibly can, leaving the result to fate.

“Well, what the devil do you want, sirrah?”

This last objurgation was addressed to a servant, who put his head in at the door.

“If you please, Sir Vincent, my lady’s respects, and she would like to see you,” replied the man.

“Come, here is an unprecedented incident; a flat contradiction to all that I have said. Her ladyship actually sends for me. What can be in the wind?” thought Sir Vincent to himself, but aloud he merely inquired:

“Where is her ladyship?”

“In the drawing-room, if you please, sir.”

“Very well, go and say that I will be with her ladyship in a moment.”

And wondering much what could be the cause of such an unusual summons, Sir Vincent repaired to the drawing-room.

He found Lady Lester its sole occupant.

As he looked at her he thought, “Surely there never was before a woman so fair and so unattractive.”

She was, indeed, a beautiful picture, as she sat half reclined

upon a sofa of pale blue damask, whose delicate hues threw out into greater relief the ample folds of her white brocade dress, that, indeed, was scarcely whiter than the rounded and tapering arms, the gracefully curved bosom and throat, and the finely turned face of the wearer. A wreath of pale blush roses crowned her very light hair, and bunches of the same flowers looped up the lace fall of her bosom and shoulders, and the lace flounces of her skirt. There was a want of color in her fair complexion, of brightness in her light blue eyes, and of animation in her manner, or, to sum up briefly, a want of soul in that body; which was the reason, perhaps, why that fair form had withstood all the encroachments of time, for the soul is a great wearer and tearer of the body, and Lady Lester being soulless, or nearly so, was still youthful-looking at forty-two, and but for the fulness of her form she might really have been taken for twenty. She had gone through life gently and calmly. And now she reclined upon the sofa as motionless as a beautiful statue. There was about her none of that feminine restlessness that requires the aid of a fan, or a screen, or some such toy, to afford graceful occupation for the hands and eyes. Lady Lester could set motionless for hours, the very picture of perfect grace, in perfect repose.

She merely lifted her large eyelids on seeing Sir Vincent enter.

"Well, Clare, you sent for me; it must have been that I might admire your very *recherche* toilet. You are going out. I presume?"

"Yes, I am due at Carleton House this evening; but I have half an hour to spare, and I wish to speak to you about something very particular."

"Well, my dear?" said the baronet, drawing forward a chair and sinking into it.

"You are aware, I presume, Sir Vincent, that this great Etheridge case, that has been before the House of Lords for weeks, is at length decided in favor of the new claimant."

"Yes, I believe so, last week."

"Precisely."

"But in what manner does the decision of the great Swin-

burne case interest your most serene ladyship?" inquired the baronet, smiling.

"You shall know," said Lady Lester, rousing herself a little, taking the *Morning Post* from a table near, turning to the fashionable intelligence, and reading:

"The Duchess of Beresleigh, and the ladies Wardour, have arrived at Beresleigh House. With her grace is the young and beautiful Rosamond Baroness Etheridge, of Swinburne, in whose favor the great Etheridge case, that has occupied the House of Lords for so many weeks past, has lately been decided. At the next royal drawing-room, Lady Etheridge will be presented to their Majesties by the Duchess of Beresleigh, whose guest she remains for the season."

"Well?" inquired the baronet, looking up inquiringly, as his lady finished reading.

"Well! Very well! Do you not perceive the purpose of the duchess in all this?"

"I confess I do not; the act seems perfectly natural. Beresleigh Court, if I recollect aright, is near Swinburne Castle; and what is more natural than that the duchess should *chaperone* this young lady, her neighbor, and with no other purpose than kindness to the orphan girl!"

"Orphan girl!—orphan *heiress* of the ancient barony of Swinburne Castle, and of sixty thousand pounds per annum! Ha! ha! such an orphan will not lack *friends* to pity her motherless and fatherless condition, and show all kindness," sneered the lady, with more of feeling than she usually betrayed.

"Well, my dear, that is natural also. I only hope that her friends may be judicious ones, and that the kindness shown may benefit without hurting her; still, I cannot see how this should interest us."

"You cannot! Well, perhaps your eyes may be opened when you shall have heard another little piece of gossip which I shall read to you."

And turning to another part of the paper, she read:

"Approaching marriage in High life.—It is confidently reported that the young Duke of B—l—h will soon lead to the hymenial altar the youthful and lovely lady E—r—e of S—nb—n—e."

“There ! now do you see ?”

“I see that the paragraph means to say that the Duke of Beresleigh is about to marry Lady Etheridge.”

“Exactly ; and that is just what the old duchess intended when she invited the wealthy young baroness to become her guest,” said Lady Lester, with so much asperity that Sir Vincent, raising his eyebrows, inquired, with some surprise :

“Well, my dear ; and why should the manœuvres of the duchess in favor of her son discompose you ?”

“Sir Vincent, I should think you might guess. It is perfectly disgusting to see how that old wretch has pounced down upon this young, inexperienced girl, just like a hawk upon a dove, and snapped her up for her own ruined spendthrift of a son, before she has had an opportunity of seeing the world and choosing for herself. I say it is perfectly disgusting.”

“Perhaps it is, if true. But still, what is it to *us* ?”

“Sir Vincent, we, also, have a son who must make an eligible marriage.”

“Oh—h—h. I understand you. Lady Etheridge, with her vast estates, would have been a very desirable *parti* for Ruthven. But this atrocious old ogress of a manœuvering dowager has been beforehand with us,” said the baronet, laughing, and then adding, “but never mind, my dear, let us hope it is not true ; we have nothing to ground a belief upon but a newspaper paragraph, which is the most mendacious thing in existence. It is generally safe to believe just the opposite of that which it states.”

“That is my only hope ; and it is just possible that I may meet the duchess and this young paragon at Carleton House to-night ; I have ordered Ruthven to attend me thither—and here he comes,” said her ladyship, as the door opened, and gave admittance to Mr. Ruthven Lester.

“Success to your diplomacy. I would give the duchess a long start and back your cool, clear head at any odds against all her grace’s hot haste,” said the baronet, smiling.

“And, by the way, Sir Vincent, if you should go out before I rise in the morning, I wish you would leave me a check for a thousand pounds ! I must give a party for this young baroness.”

"Ah, these tickets in the matrimonial lottery cost something, I see," thought Sir Vincent, as he gallantly handed his lady to her carriage.

At Carleton House, that evening, the beauty, fashion, and celebrity of the court and city were assembled to assist at one of the most brilliant entertainments that followed the nuptials of the Prince of Wales with the amiable and unfortunate Princess Caroline of Brunswick. It was a scene of almost oriental magnificence, splendor, and luxury. Not the seraglio of an eastern sultan, or the sensual paradise of a follower of Mohammed, could have presented a larger or more varied collection of houries than were gathered together in the royal drawing-rooms of Carleton House. Above this crowd of brilliant brunettes and delicate blondes, no less than four rival queens of beauty contended for the crown. These were the Duchesses of Devonshire and Gordon and the two Misses Gunning. But these ladies had been for many seasons the admired of all admirers; and though the lustre of their bloom had scarcely commenced to fall, the charm of their novelty was certainly dimmed.

Lady Lester made a point of arriving late. The rooms were quite full. After having paid her respects to the Prince and Princess of Wales, leaning on the arm of her son, she made a tour of the rooms, in search of the Duchess of Beresleigh and her party. In vain, for neither the duchess nor the Ladies Wardour were anywhere to be seen. Though constantly nodding, and smiling, and exchanging compliments with her fashionable friends, and longing to make inquiries, she forbore, from that deep policy that taught her what great results sometimes spring from trifles; for to ask for the Duchess of Beresleigh would turn the conversation upon her grace and her grace's beautiful guest, the wealthy young baroness, and start—no one could foresee—how many rival schemes to entrap the heiress.

"I see how it is," said Lady Lester to herself. "The duchess will not bring her *here* for two reasons that are now very apparent to me: the first is, that this profligate Prince of Wales, who is in no degree reformed by his marriage with a woman whom he cannot appreciate. who has besides grown

weary of his old flames, must not be permitted to see Lady Etheridge until she is secured to the duke; and the second reason is that the young baroness is evidently intended to make her *débüt* in society upon the occasion of her first presentation to their Majesties. Consequently, I cannot issue tickets for my party until I know when the next drawing-room is to be held."

And, wearied with her fruitless promenade, Lady Lester turned into an alcove shaded and perfumed with many boughs and wreaths of flowers, seated herself within its cool shadows, and said:

"You may go and leave me here to rest for half an hour, Ruthven, and then order the carriage and return for me."

The young man departed, nothing loth, and the lady, indolently fanning herself, fell into meditation.

She was soon interrupted by the approach of two persons. With the secretiveness and curiosity of her nature, she withdrew into the deepest shadows of the alcove, where she was quite concealed by the branches of an orange-tree.

The two persons entered the alcove. The first she recognized as the Prince of Wales, the second as one of his gentlemen in waiting, known even then as the confidant of his pleasures and vices.

"You perceive that the duchess has not appeared here this evening with the beauty," said the prince.

"No, your Royal Highness."

"But then the Duchess of Beresleigh never was a *habitué* of Carleton House. You have seen this new beauty?"

"Yes, your Royal Highness."

"And are her charms as great as they have been represented?"

"Your Royal Highness may be assured she is a prize worth all the trouble that we shall have to gain her. She is about twenty-two years of age, her form is of medium height and beautifully proportioned, though not yet so rounded as it will be in a few years. Her complexion is as fair as a lily and as blooming as a rose. Her features of a delicate Grecian cast. Her eyes of a dark, brilliant hue. Her cheeks are roses, her lips rose-buds. And her hair, of a bright, warm,

golden hue, surrounds this beauteous face like a halo. She is not only a beauty of the first order, but, more than that, a beauty of your Royal Highness's own exquisite taste," said the minion, with a truculent bow.

"McMahon, you have succeeded in exciting my interest in this fair creature, and now I shall rely on your skill and address in procuring an interview with her."

"Your Royal Highness knows that I am ever keenly alive to your wishes, and active in your service; and though this Hesperian fruit is guarded by a terrible dragon in the shape of a duchess, I do not at all despair of plucking it for your Royal Highness."

"And remember that a prince's gratitude waits on your success."

The parties then left the alcove, and mingled with the company.

"Oh, the wretches! the atrocious wretches!" exclaimed Lady Lester, emerging from her concealment, and quite aroused from her usual apathy by the discovery of a plot that threatened not only the ruin of her own plans, but the total destruction of an innocent girl. "The most heinous wretches! And what a fate is this of the friendless young baroness, exposed alike to the matrimonial manœuvres of an old dowager, and the pursuit of a profligate prince! I must find some way of rescuing her from these perils," concluded her ladyship, highly indignant at the enormity of others, yet in her sweet, human self-deception quite unconscious that her own plans in regard to the young baroness were quite as mercenary as those ascribed to the duchess, if not as dishonorable as those discovered in the prince.

The return of Ruthven Lester put an end to her soliloquy. She took the arm of her son, went and made her *congé* to the unhappy Princess of Wales, and left the palace.

In the hall of Lester House she encountered Sir Vincent, who had just returned from a protracted debate in the House of Commons.

"Well, has your ladyship inveigled—I beg your pardon—fascinated this little rustic beauty?" inquired the baronet.

"I have not even seen her. Trust the duchess for that

I might have known it. Their party was not at Carleton House," said her ladyship, pettishly.

"Very proper! Carleton House is precisely the last place in the kingdom to which I should introduce a young beauty," replied the baronet.

"Oh, it was not altogether an objection to the society to be found at Carleton House that caused the duchess to absent herself with her charge; it was, I presume, with the intention that the young heiress should make her *débüt* in the drawing-room of their Majesties."

"Quite right," said the baronet, smiling.

"And now, Sir Vincent, I must wish you good-night and retire," said her ladyship, with a cool bend of her fair head, as she floated past and ascended the stairs to her dressing-room, where she found Mademoiselle Jeanette, the ministering priestess of that temple of vanity, in attendance.

Lady Lester sank indolently into her dressing-chair, lifted her languid eyes to the mirror before her, and started to see the careworn look upon her usually calm face.

"I protest a few more hours of such unpleasant excitement as I have had this evening will give me quite a middle-aged aspect. I really cannot afford, at my age, to make myself anxious on Ruthven's account. He must take his chance with others. And yet it would be a great pity to let this rich old barony of Swinburne slip out of our reach for the want of a little exertion on my part. Well, it is of no use to lose my sleep with thinking. The day is long enough for that. Jeanette!"

"Oui, milady."

"Bring me some of those sedative drops; make my chamber quite dark, and remember in the morning to be in attendance here, to prevent any one making the least noise near my door. I must sleep for twelve hours, Jeanette."

"Oui, certainement, madame," replied the obsequious *femme de chambre*, as she assisted her mistress to divest herself of the ball dress and prepare for repose.

CHAPTER XV

THE DUCHESS OF BERESLEIGH.

And now I see with eyes serene,
 The very pulse of the machine,
 A being breathing thoughtful breath,
 A traveller betwixt life and death ;
 The reason firm, the temperate will ;
 Endurance, foresight, strength, and skill ;
 A perfect woman, nobly planned,
 To warn, to comfort, and command ;
 And yet a spirit, still and bright,
 With something of an angel light.—*Wordsworth.*

THE Duchess of Beresleigh was a very different woman from that which the jealousy and suspicions of Lady Lester had represented her to be. Her title of "Grace" was no misnomer. She was one of nature's as well as of society's noblewomen—one whose personal excellence might have redeemed her whole order from the charge of irrational pride and hard selfishness. Born to her high rank, she had nevertheless regarded it as investing her rather with duties and responsibilities towards her less fortunate fellow-creatures than with privileges to scorn or oppress them. She ever, in grateful humility, remembered Him who had made her healthful, beautiful, intellectual, powerful, good, and great, to differ from the sickliest, plainest, simplest, poorest, and feeblest dependent on her estate.

On meeting such a one, bowed down with illness, poverty, and despair, her thought would often be :

"My spirit might have been sent into that body, and invested with those trials and sufferings. Why have I been spared and that one afflicted? I know not; but I feel that the possession of superior advantages brings with it terrible responsibilities."

And with these thoughts, and upon these principles, the duchess spent much of her time, talents and means in the relief and reform of those dependent upon her. Personally or by proxy, she assisted the poor, cured the sick, instructed the ignorant, and reformed the guilty. She educated her

sens and daughters in the same high and holy principles that governed her own conduct.

They had lived mostly in Beresleigh Court, which adjoined Swinburne Chase, but the families had never been intimate, because the duchess had deeply disapproved the character and conduct of the late baron as well as that of the guardian he had left over his heiress ; and, in fact, soon after the death of the baron, the Duke of Beresleigh had been appointed resident minister at one of the continental courts, where, at the end of five years, he died.

The duchess and her family spent their first year of mourning in retirement, on the Continent, and then returned to Beresleigh Court.

It was but a few weeks after their settlement at home that Doctor Seymour called upon the duchess, and commended to her kind offices the new Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne, and, in answer to the inquiries of her grace, related the strange discovery that had thrown down one young girl from rank and wealth to poverty and dependence, and elevated another from indigence and obscurity to fortune and power. The worthy doctor spoke of both these young persons with the highest praise of their conduct under their opposite ordeals of sudden prosperity and sudden adversity.

The duchess was at once interested in the new claimant of her neighborly attentions ; and no less so in the high-souled woman who had so promptly resigned her fortune and position, and so nobly sustained her cruel reverses.

Her grace promised to call on the new Lady Etheridge, and secretly resolved also, as soon as she should go up to town, to seek out Laura Elmer.

She kept her word, and took an early opportunity of visiting Swinburne Castle. The beauty, goodness and intelligence of the young baroness soon won the love and esteem of the duchess, than whom no woman ever lived better able to judge of the characters of those with whom she was brought into communion.

After the interchanging of several visits between the duchess and Lady Etheridge, her grace invited the young baroness to spend some weeks at Beresleigh Court.

Rose accepted the invitation, and passed a month very pleasantly with her new friends.

It was in the intimacy of daily intercourse that Rosamond learned to revere the lofty character of the duchess, and to love the amiable dispositions of the young Ladies Wardour.

But there was another member of the family that interested Rosamond scarcely less than did the duchess and her daughters; this was, indeed, the present head of the house.

George Duke of Beresleigh, was now in the thirty-third year of his age. To a very handsome person he united a highly cultivated mind and an amiable heart.

Benevolence towards a friendless young woman, newly come into his own rank, and holding a very doubtful footing there, first induced him to follow the recommendation of his mother, and show some kindly attention to her guest. But this course of conduct, commenced from duty, was continued from inclination.

To his surprise and pleasure he found nothing underbred in the manner and nothing vulgar in the mind of this young beauty and newly-made baroness; indeed, every day discovered new graces in her person and in her spirit; and the duke soon found admiration growing into a warmer and more permanent sentiment.

But at thirty-three men are not so apt to act rashly from an impulse of admiration or affection, as they are at ten years younger or ten years older than that age; consequently, the duke held his inclinations in check, and restricted his attentions to Rosamond within such limits of intellectual intercommunion as should be safe to both.

Rosamond on her part, began by admiring the son for his resemblance, in person and in character, to the mother whom she so deeply revered; next, she found herself taking great pleasure in the society and conversation of the duke, when he was present, and in thoughts and memories of him when he was absent; then her mind became more occupied with the future than with the past. The memory of her false and unworthy love was fading from her heart like the black shadows of night. The hope of a higher and holier affection was dawning upon her soul like the bright beams of morning. Yet was Rosamond surprised and shocked at this change in herself.

It is always so with the earnest young hearts. They cherish the sorrow of a first disappointment as if it were some holy thing; they will not let it go, until the wise and tender mother, Nature, gradually steals away the dark shadow of a past dream, and substitutes the bright substances of a present reality.

Rosamond seldom or never recurred to the subject of Albert Hastings *alias* William Lovel, and when she did, it was only to wonder how she could have honored him, first, with such a degree of love, and secondly, with such a degree of hate, when in fact the best and the worst that he deserved was simply pity and contempt.

Still she was surprised and humiliated to find her affections going out towards another object.

"Is it possible," she said to herself, "that my nature is so light as to change easily? I will go back to the solitude of Swinburne Castle, and take myself seriously to task, and try to come to my senses. In truth, it is quite time, since my thoughts are running upon one who has never requested me so to employ them."

And back to Swinburne Castle went the young baroness, but not to remain there long.

The Duchess of Beresleigh, with her family, was going to town for the season. She came over to Swinburne Castle, invited Rosamond to be of her party, and would take no denial.

Rosamond, who could refuse the duchess nothing, after a feeble resistance, yielded. And accordingly it was arranged that Lady Etheridge of Swinburne should accompany them to town, and enter society under the auspices of the Duchess of Beresleigh.

The duke preceded the family by two or three weeks, in order to take his seat in the House of Lords, and give his vote and influence in favor of Rosamond Etheridge, whose claim to the Barony of Swinburne was then before the peers. There was, however, scarcely a shadow of doubt upon the minds of any as to the final issue of the case.

A few days previous to the commencement of the Duchess of Beresleigh's journey to London, the duke ran down to

Somerset, and suddenly appeared at Beresleigh Court, with the news that the great case had been decided in favor of Rosamond Etheridge.

The duchess expressed her gratification, and immediately ordered her carriage, and rode over to Swinburne Castle, to convey the joyful intelligence to the young baroness.

She found Rose in the library, engaged in her studies.

"I have come to tell you, my dear, that the House of Lords have just confirmed your claim to the Barony of Swinburne. The case was decided the night before last, and Beresleigh immediately took post horses and set out, and has travelled night and day to bring us the intelligence. Let me be the first to congratulate you, my dear."

Rosamond burst into tears and sobbed aloud, crying:

"Oh, Laura! Laura! Oh, Laura! Laura!"

The duchess looked surprised.

Rosamond tried to compose herself, and faltered forth:

"Oh, madam, do not wonder that I weep so! The fiat that confirms my right to a splendor for which I never was intended, condemns another and a better woman, who would have graced this rank, to a life of poverty and obscurity. Oh, Laura! Laura! how much better you would have become this state than I?"

"Your emotion shows a good heart, my dear. Still, as justice is on your own side, and justice should always be done, I am very glad that the case has been decided in your favor. When we go up to London we will seek out Miss Elmer, and do all that we can to soften the hardship of her reverses, and show our respect for her noble character," said the duchess, soothingly.

Rosamond seized her hand, and kissed it fervently, exclaiming:

"Oh, madam! you who have so much power over other minds, you who can make me do just as you please, will you not try to make Laura Elmer divide this fortune with me, and take the best half as her portion? I shall never be happy else."

"My dear, your generous impulses do you credit, though they are quite quixotic. Miss Elmer ought not and would not accept such a bounty."

"Bounty! it is her right, after being educated in the belief that this barony was hers by inheritance, after growing up in habits of luxury and of command, it is unjust that she should be hurled down to poverty, hardship, and dependence!"

"It is hard, but not unjust, my dear; Miss Elmer would not consider it so."

"But I contend that she has a *right* to at least one-half of those possessions which for twenty years she considered wholly her own."

"I do not think so, my dear; nor could Miss Elmer, if I judge correctly of her character, be brought to see it in the light that you do."

"Then what shall I do? I feel myself to be a mere usurper, holding for a transient season a position to which I have no real right! and I am not even permitted to perform any act of generosity to distinguish my short day of prosperity, and comfort me with its memory in my day of adversity."

"How strangely you talk, Rosamond."

"I talk as I feel, your grace! Deep in my heart I feel that this garish splendor of fortune that surrounds me is as transient as the sunshine of a winter's day! Would that I could do some real good with it while it lasts, to make me remembered kindly, when I fall back into obscurity!" said Rose, solemnly.

"Your feelings are morbid, dear Rosamond; they are consequent upon your sudden rise. A season in town, so dangerous to most young persons, will be really healthful to you; variety will dissipate your gloomy pre-visions," said the duchess, pleasantly.

"Gloomy! They are not gloomy. And indeed they would be cheerful, if I could think that, when I sink out of sight, dear Laura could take her place again."

The duchess arose and kissed her brow, and bade her hasten her preparations for their journey to town, and then took her leave.

A beautiful confidence subsisted between the duke and duchess, the mother and her only son.

Thus, when the duchess returned home, she first went into her dressing-room to lay off her bonnet and shawl, and then repaired to the library, where she was almost sure of finding the duke.

Sinking upon a sofa, and looking at him affectionately, she said :

“George, I have just returned from carrying to Lady Etheridge the intelligence of her good fortune. I am more than ever pleased with her. Surely prosperity never came to one more truly deserving of it, who would wear it more meekly or use it more worthily.”

The duke’s eyes beamed. What lover does not delight in hearing his loved one praised? The duchess saw the joy of his countenance, and, smiling archly, said :

“I think, George, you have quite as good an opinion as myself, of this young lady.”

“Madam, I am so deeply interested in this young lady that I tremble for the ordeal to which this London season will subject—her goodness and my happiness.”

“Ah! is it so, George? I had even judged as much! Why, then, do you not secure this prize while it is easily within your reach, and before any rival can endanger your success? Why do you not propose to her at once, before we go up to town? I feel very sure that Lady Etheridge is not indifferent to you.”

“Why! dear madam, I am certain that I should have loved this lovely Rosamond, had I met her in the humblest society, and become as well acquainted with her heart and mind as I am now. Therefore, it is from no doubt of my own feelings that I now hesitate.”

“Then you need not hesitate from any doubt of *hers*. I am sure that she likes you well enough to listen to your suit; so you may propose at once if you like, and Lady Etheridge will enter the world as your betrothed bride—inaccessible to all rival suitors.”

“Dear madam, that is just what I cannot in honor do. To bind so inexperienced a young creature by a premature engagement, before she has had an opportunity of seeing the world, looks too much like entrapping an heiress. No;

highly as I admire, deeply as I love, Lady Etheridge, I must suppress my feelings, until by a free intercourse with society, she shall have an excellent opportunity of comparing her present humble admirer with others more deserving of her favor. Then only will I lay my suit at the feet of Lady Etheridge."

The duchess blushed deeply as she answered:

"I see the wisdom as well as the delicacy of your delay, Beresleigh; and I admit that my anxiety to gain you so fair and so good a prize blinded me to the proper course of action. I can only say now, that you are perfectly right, and I can only hope that heaven may bless your rectitude."

With this the mother and son parted to dress for dinner.

And within a week from this day, the duchess and her family, accompanied by Lady Etheridge, set out for London, and in due course of time arrived at their town residence, Beresleigh House, Belgrave-square.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE RISING STAR.

To hide true worth from public view
Is burying diamonds in their mine;
"All is not gold that shines," 'tis true,
But all that *is* gold *ought* to shine.—*Bishop.*

As soon as it was known that the Duchess of Beresleigh, with the young Ladies Wardour and the youthful heiress of Swinburne, was in town, a shower of cards fell daily at Beresleigh House. These her grace duly acknowledged by sending or leaving her own card at various residences of the callers.

Many morning visits were also made to the boudoir of the duchess, and these her grace received alone, or with her daughters.

Lady Etheridge was always invited.

Numerous invitations to dinners, evening parties, balls, etc., arrived for the ladies of the family; but all these were politely declined, except such as referred to entertainments to be given after the first drawing-room of the season. In a word, the duchess had determined that her beautiful young guest should make her first entrance into society at the Royal Palace of St. James. With a woman's zest and a mother's zeal she superintended the preparation of a magnificent court-dress for Lady Etheridge.

The important day arrived.

Wishing upon this occasion to give her whole attention to her young *protégée*, the duchess resolved not to embarrass herself with all her daughters. Therefore, she decided that for once the Ladies Wardour should remain at home.

As by her rank the Duchess of Beresleigh took precedence of all ladies, except the duchesses of royal descent, it was proper that her grace should be early at the palace. The drawing-room was to be held from twelve to three.

At half-past eleven the duchess, in her court dress—a white satin skirt, a purple velvet train, an ermine mantle, and head-dress formed of a circlet of diamonds and a plume of ostrich feathers—entered the dressing-room of her *protégée*, to inspect the toilet of the latter.

"Beauty, when unadorned," is *not* "adorned the most."

Rose, in her simple cottage-dress, had been very, very pretty.

Rose, in her court dress, was dazzlingly beautiful. Though a young maiden, yet a baroness in her own right, she had a matron's privilege of wearing brilliant jewels. The family diamonds had been re-set for this occasion.

She wore a robe of white point lace over a white satin skirt, and a train of rich white brocade. Her glossy light hair was arranged in ringlets, and crowned with a wreath of white rose-buds, glittering with the dew of small diamonds. Bouquets of the same flowers rested upon her bosom, looped up her sleeves, and fastened her train. Circlets of pure diamonds invested her fair neck and arms. Boots of white satin, with diamond buckles; snow-white gloves; a fan of

marabout feathers, mounted with brilliants, and a handkerchief of cobweb texture, completed her costume. Excitement had given a more brilliant splendor to her deep blue eyes, and a brighter bloom to her roseate cheeks.

The duchess gazed upon her with delight, commended the skill of Mademoiselle Gabrielle, the French dressing-maid, and then turning to her *protégée*, said :

‘ The carriage is announced, love, and it is quite time we were off ’

They descended to the hall, went out and entered the coach, and in a few minutes were rolling on towards St. James’s Palace, where they arrived at twelve o’clock.

The place was thronged with coronetted carriages, filled with splendidly-dressed visitors, waiting their turn to draw up before the gates. The coach of the duchess rolled into its place behind that of the Duchess of Leeds, and in due time drew up before the palace doors.

The duchess and her *protégée* alighted and entered the palace.

Queen Charlotte had brought from her father’s court much of the German love of solemn pomp. The outer halls and ante-rooms of St. James’s were filled with officers of the household, in their gorgeous costumes, and with their badges of office.

Leaning upon the arm of the duchess, Lady Etheridge trembled, as many a novice has done before and since, under the overwhelming effect of royal state and magnificence. A few judicious words from the duchess reassured her, and they passed on to the drawing-room, that was already filled with a brilliant company.

At the upper end of the room stood the royal party, consisting of the king and queen, the Prince and Princess of Wales, the Dukes of York and Clarence, and the Princesses Augusta and Amelia. The Duchess of Norfolk was just in the act of paying her respects to royalty. The Duchess of Beresleigh took her place in the circle, and, whilst waiting her turn, quietly indicated to Lady Etheridge the most noted persons present.

First she named the members of the royal party, upon whom Rose gazed with a hushed and awful veneration.

“That very ordinary-looking old gentleman, my dear, is really the king. That very plain, elderly lady on his left, is truly the queen. That handsome, somewhat dissipated-looking man, on the left of her majesty, is the Prince of Wales. The unhappy-looking woman by his side is the newly married Caroline of Brunswick, Princess of Wales. The young ladies on the right of his majesty are the Princesses Augusta and Amelia. The young gentlemen by their sides are the Dukes of York and Clarence,” said the duchess, in a voice so low as to be quite inaudible to any one except the interlocutor.

“And those standing behind the royal party?” inquired Rose, in a subdued key.

“They are the lords and ladies in waiting upon their majesties—Lord Aylesbury, the Duchess of Ancaster, Lady Holderness, Lady Lester, and Colonel Hastings.”

At the naming of the two last Rose started, and changed color so visibly, that the duchess turned and looked at her in silent inquiry.

“Oh,” said Rose, in a voice scarcely above her breath, “Colonel Hastings was the guardian of Laura Elmer when she was supposed to be the heiress of Swinburne, and Lady Lester is her present employer and patroness. The sudden sight of persons in such interesting relations with my dearest friend, rather startled me.”

“Ah, I see,” replied her grace, drawing the arm of her *protégée* within her own, and moving on towards the royal party.

And while the room seemed whirling around with Rose, the duchess paid her respects to their majesties, and presented ‘The Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne.’

Rose courtesied lowly, and blushed deeply, as she bowed over and kissed the hand that was offered to her salute.

Her graceful embarrassment was without the least *mauvais honte*, and did not detract from her beauty.

A loud murmur of admiration ran through the royal circle as the duchess and her beautiful *protégée* passed on. As they receded from the royal party, the subdued whisper of admiration which respect for majesty had restrained, grew more audible, and exclamations of—

“How beautiful!”

"How graceful!"

"How elegant!"

"This rising star will eclipse all the court beauties!" were heard all around.

And one baleful whisper reached the ears of the duchess.

"Look, how the eyes of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales follow her! We shall have a new sultana, *vice* the Countess of Jersey, deposed."

On hearing this wicked whisper, the import of which did not reach the intelligence of Rose's innocent nature, the duchess looked around haughtily, and silenced by a glance, the unprincipled speaker, whom she recognized as an officer of the guard in attendance upon the prince's person.

She passed on with her *protégée* through the crowded ante-rooms to the outer hall, and thence to her carriage.

"You have made what is called a 'great sensation,' my love. Expect to be invited to the court balls, and everywhere else as a matter of course. Invitations will pour in upon you. And now that you have, as in duty bound, paid your respects first to royalty, you are at liberty to enter freely into the gayeties of society. Go everywhere you please excepting always to Carleton House," said the duchess, as they drove homeward.

"Carleton House?" echoed the young baroness, in wonder

"Yes, my dear, Carleton House, the palace of the Prince and Princess of Wales."

"But why not to Carleton House, madam?"

"Because, my dear, I do not think it expedient that you should go there."

The eyes of Rose opened wide in astonishment.

"But why? If it is the home of the Prince and Princess of Wales, and if they deign to invite me?"

"My love, I desire you to trust in my having a good reason for interdicting Carleton House to you, without asking me to explain what that reason is," said the duchess very gravely.

Rose blushed rosily, and answered:

"I place myself in your hands, dear madam, and shall feel only too grateful for your kind guidance."

"You will not find me a very stern monitress, my dear. But hear we are at home," said her grace, as the carriage drew up before Beresleigh House.

* * * * *

As Appius Claudius gazed upon Virginia, as Sextus gazed upon Lucretia, as Satan gazed upon Eve, so gazed the Royal Satyr of Wales upon the budding beauties of the young baroness.

Hurrying home from St. James's, he shut himself up in his closet at Carleton House, and summoned the jackal of his vicious pleasures, the infamous Colonel McElroy, to his presence.

The officer entering, bowed deeply.

"Shut the door, shut the door, and draw near," said the Prince.

The officer obeyed, and stood before his master.

"I have seen her, Mac! I have seen her! and by heaven I am in love *in reality* for the first time these ten years! Her equal in loveliness I have never seen! A Hebe, Psyche, and Venus, all in one! Mac, I must have that woman!"

"Your Royal Highness must have whatever you like; you are the Prince of Wales; but—"

"But—well? But what?"

"She is the Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne."

"But not, upon that account, free from the weaknesses of her sex. Mac, I must have that woman. I do not care what it may cost."

"She is the heiress of fifty thousand pounds a year, your Royal Highness."

"And not to be tempted by any offer of settlements. I am aware of that. I was not alluding to pecuniary arts, but to the cost of trouble, difficulty, peril to life and character."

The jackal averted his head to make a grimace aside.

"Mac, I depend upon your tact, zeal, and discretion. That ancient dragon, the duchess of Beresleigh, has never favored Carleton House with her presence, and she will certainly never bring her young beauty either to this place or the houses of any of my friends, where I might possibly meet her. What do you think?"

"I think it extremely probable that your Royal Highness reasons rightly. The Duchess Dowager will take no pains to introduce her *protégée* to your Royal Highness or your friends. Common rumor says that her grace designs the young heiress for the future Duchess of Beresleigh."

"What, then, would you advise me to do?"

"If your Royal Highness will deign to listen to me, I think I could propose a plan for bringing you into closer acquaintance with this young beauty."

"Very well. Let us hear what your plan is. Come this way."

And the conspirators retired to hatch their diabolical plot.

There were two other individuals present at the royal drawing-room, who witnessed, with great uneasiness, the sensation created by the presentation of the beautiful young baroness—these were Colonel Hastings and Mr. Hastings.

As soon as they could withdraw they adjourned to a neighboring coffee-house, and, calling for a private room, sat down to discuss the event.

Mr. Hastings opened the conversation by exclaiming, in a vehement manner:

"I love her more than ever! It is not her rank and splendor only, though that is much; it is her exquisite personal loveliness! I loved her even as a cottage-girl, in despite of all my pride! And now that I see this rare jewel in its proper setting, now that I see her surrounded with pomp and splendor, the admired of all eyes, the desired of all hearts, I love her with a passion of which I scarcely believed myself capable. I must have her or go mad!"

"Well, you *shall* have her, if you will only be patient," replied the colonel, coolly.

"Patient, sir! The House of Lords has confirmed her claim to the great Swinburne Barony! She has been presented at court and received with distinguished honor! She is not only the wealthiest heiress, but the most beautiful girl that has appeared in society for many seasons! She is the favorite of the Duchess of Beresleigh, who, of course, wants her and her fortune for the young duke. She will have many suitors! She will be followed, flattered, favored in

every possible way, and, before the season is over, she will be affianced to the Duke of Beresleigh!"

"And, if she were affianced to a royal duke, I have that secret which will break the marriage off," said the colonel, with the same calmness.

"You say that you have this power, sir, and I am constrained to believe you. Why, then, do you not use it at once? There is an old proverb to the effect that 'delays are dangerous.' In this case, with so many rival claimants of her favor, I think delay is doubly dangerous."

"True, in some respects. Yet you have also heard, that if delays are dangerous, precipitation is often fatal. And it would be so in this case, for two reasons. First, she has not had time yet to soften in her feelings of resentment towards you. Secondly, she has not had time either, to become so used to the pomp and splendor of her new rank as to make it a matter of habit and necessity to her. If now I were to attempt to use the power this secret gives me over her, she would defy me, and sooner than marry you with her present feeling she would resign her rank. No, my boy! We must wait until time has softened her anger against you, and confirmed her love of wealth and position. In a word, we must wait until the world has educated her."

"And how long will that be?" exclaimed the young man, ironically.

"Not many months, my dear boy. And, in the meantime, if there should be a serious probability of her marriage, I shall immediately seek an interview with her, and, as I said before, even if the bridegroom elect were a royal duke, I would break the marriage off."

"I must leave it in your hands, sir," replied Mr. Hastings, and the conversation ended.

* * * * *

There was still a third party, whose peace was disturbed by the universal homage paid to the beautiful heiress. This was Lady Lester, who, upon her return home, shut herself up in her boudoir to reflect.

"This young baroness has made a decided impression. Ru'hven will have many rivals, and he has not been intro-

duced to her yet. I must lose no time in his service. Tomorrow I will call at Beresleigh House myself, and leave my card, together with an invitation to an evening party, for—let me see—the 26th—she can have no engagements so far in advance as that. Ruthven must be introduced to her. Society will throw them frequently into each other's company, and Ruthven's very handsome person and fascinating address must do the rest."

And so saying, Lady Lester rang for her maid, to divest her of the heavy court-dress, and bring her a cup of tea.

* * * * *

Meantime, what effect had the events of the day upon the beautiful and admired subject of all this intoxicating homage, and all these plots and counterplots?

We shall see.

On her return home, Rose threw herself into her dressing-chair, and placed herself in the hands of her maid to be disrobed. While she sat there, she fell into deep thought, saying to herself—

"They tell me that I have made a great sensation, even upon royalty; that I have achieved a great social triumph by simply appearing at the drawing-room of her majesty. They call me the star of the ascendant in the empyrean of fashion; and even if this is so, what is it all to me 'so long as Mordecai, the Jew, sits at the king's gate?' What is it to me if all the world worships this poor beauty set in a golden frame, since *he* has no kind word for Rose? I was happier in the country when my claim to the barony was unsettled, and my fortunes uncertain, for then *he* was good to me; and now, alas! since my claim has been confirmed, and we have come up to town, he never notices me by any attention beyond what is required by etiquette. I wonder if I have displeased him, or if he has taken a dislike to me? I must not even try to find out. Oh, I am very unhappy!"

And here the adored beauty, the worshipped heiress, the triumphant *debutanté* into court circles, of whom the whole world of fashion was talking with admiration or with envy, dropped her face into her hands and wept passionately.

Mademoiselle Gabrielle, in alarm, brought Hungary water

aromatic vinegar, sal ammonia, and every thing else she could think of as restoratives, and declared, since she could see no other cause for tears, that the fatigue and excitement of the day had been too much for "miladie." Rose did not contradict her, but composed and recovered herself sufficiently to present a cheerful face at the lunch table, where she had to receive the congratulations of the Ladies Wardour upon what they called her great social triumph.

* * * * *

Rose had spoken the truth to herself. Since the confirmation of her claim to the Barony of Swinburne, and their arrival in London, the young Duke of Beresleigh had avoided the society of the beautiful young heiress as much as was consistent with the courtesy due to his mother's guest. Loving her with an affection as pure and disinterested as it was ardent and unchangeable, he wished to leave her free to form an extensive acquaintance with the world of society before becoming a competitor for her hand, so that, finally, if she should accept his hand, she would do so in the full consciousness of his comparative merits, and he would have the happiness of knowing her decision to be that of an unbiassed judgment as well as of an unwavering heart.

But how was poor Rose to know his generous thoughts and motives, when his distant courtesy sent her weeping to her room that day of her great triumph!

The next morning the Duchess of Beresleigh and the Ladies Wardour, together with Lady Etheridge, were lingering over a late breakfast table, and examining the notes, letters, and cards that had been left at the house. There were many fresh ones, and among them was the card of Lady Lester, accompanied by a ticket of invitation to an evening party to be given at Lester House on that day fortnight.

"We must return Lady Lester's card and accept the invitation to her party. She is one of the leaders of fashion here," said the duchess.

"And oh, I wish so much to see my dear Miss Elmer. Oh, my dear madam, let us go to-day," said Rose, eagerly.

"Certainly; we will call at Lester House to-day if you please, my dear, but you will scarcely be able to see your

friend unless you make a special visit to herself, and see her in her own apartments. Governesses do not usually receive their friends in their employer's drawing-room," said the duchess.

"But if we call upon Lady Lester and then ask for Miss Elmer?"

"No doubt in that case she would be sent for to come down, but I ask you if you think that would be agreeable either to Miss Elmer or yourself? Would you not much rather your first *réunion* should be in private?"

"Yes, oh, yes."

"Then to-day, as it is late, we will call on Lady Lester, and in a few days you will go early in the morning to see your friend Miss Elmer. You must invite her here, and have her as often as you like."

"Oh, thank you, madam," said Rose, warmly.

The carriage was ordered, and the duchess, the Lady Katherine Wardour, and Lady Etheridge withdrew to dress.

In half an hour they were on their way to Lester House, where in about twenty minutes they drew up and sent in their cards.

Lady Lester of course was at home to the Duchess of Beresleigh and her party. They were immediately shown up into the drawing-room, where they found her in an elegant morning *negligé* of white India muslin, trimmed with silver, reclining on a sofa.

She arose and floated gracefully on to receive the duchess and the younger ladies, all of whom she greeted with much exigence.

When they were all seated, she contrived to place herself next to the young baroness, to whom she turned with a vivid smile, and said—

"I was at your presentation yesterday, my dear Lady Etheridge, and I saw the sensation that was created. Permit me to congratulate—not *you*, my dear, but society for its charming acquisition in yourself."

The young baroness bowed at this fine speech, while the rosy cloud rolled up over her fair neck and face.

She had not lost her lovely country habit of blushing at a compliment.

The conversation turned upon the incidents of the late royal drawing-room, the court circle, the Prince and Princess of Wales, the opposing cabals of St. James's Palace and Carleton House, and then diverged to the new political, literary, and fashionable stars that had arisen, or were about to arise, in the social empyrean.

When the various political planets had been discussed, Lady Lester suddenly turned to the duchess, and inquired—

“Oh, by the way, can your grace, who used always to be the first to introduce any new literary luminary to the world of society, tell us the author of the new poem about which every one is raving?”

“No; I cannot. I was about to ask the question of you who have been in town so much longer than myself,” answered the duchess.

“Ah! then nobody knows. It is reported, however, that the author is a lady who lives somewhere in the West-end. Your grace has read the poem, however?”

“Yes; and admired it very much. It is wonderfully true and beautiful.”

“And the author? Do you think it could have been written by a lady?”

“It is evidently the work of some clear-visioned, large-souled woman, one who has loved deeply, suffered greatly, and thought strongly; one who has come forth from some great life-struggle, strengthened—one who has issued from some fiery furnace of sorrow, purified. I would give much to know her,” said the duchess.

“It is rumored that the first edition of the poem is already exhausted, and that another is about to be issued, with the name of the author. How anxiously it will be expected!”

“She will be a star of the first magnitude whenever she chooses to shine forth from her cloud of *incognito*,” said the duchess.

“And of course your grace's drawing-room will be the first sphere she will illuminate,” said Lady Lester, following up the metaphor.

“I shall certainly seek her out when I know whom to seek, or where to seek her.”

"Your grace secures every new star of genius—or of beauty," said Lady Lester, turning with a bow to the young baroness.

"Nay, not *every* new star; there must be some personal excellence higher than either beauty or genius to recommend an aspirant to my favor. This lady in question, I am sure, from her writings, possesses the excellences of which I speak. I shall be happy to discover her," said the duchess, rising with a smile to take her leave.

The young baroness followed her example.

They made their adieus, entered the carriage, and returned to Beresleigh House.

There a surprise awaited them.

While the duchess, the Ladies Wardour, and Lady Etheridge were seated at lunch in the morning-room of her grace, a footman entered, and laid before the young baroness a letter, sealed with the royal crest.

"Who brought that, Barnes?" inquired the duchess, looking suspiciously at the missive.

"A messenger in the royal livery, your grace."

"Does he wait?"

"No, your grace; he said no answer was required."

"You may go."

"Now, Rose, my love, open it, and let us know what it is all about," said the duchess, using a tone of gentle authority, which, however, upon any other occasion, she would not have ventured upon.

Rose, who had been turning the letter curiously in her hands, now broke the seal and read it, and as she read, the rose clouds rolled up over her fair bosom, neck, and face.

"What is it, my dear?" inquired the duchess.

"It is," said Rose, hesitatingly, and blushing yet more deeply, "a letter appointing me one of the ladies-in-waiting upon Her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales, and commanding me to repair to Carleton House, where apartments will be ready for my reception."

The duchess could scarcely restrain an outburst of indignation.

"Am I obliged to go? Is one compelled to obey a royal mandate of this sort?" inquired Rose, in dismay.

"Heaven forbid! No, my love. On the contrary, you are obliged, by every consideration of self-respect, honor, and delicacy, to decline the appointment. You cannot become the associate of Lady Jersey, and others of the Princess's household," said the duchess, with a crimson spot glowing upon her forehead, a sign with her of almost irrepressible anger.

"But will not the Princess of Wales and the good Queen Charlotte be very angry with me for the presumption and ingratitude of declining such a mark of royal favor?"

The duchess laughed scornfully, and answered:

"The Queen and Princess of Wales do not agree better than most other mothers and daughters-in-law; but, trust me in this matter, they will perfectly harmonize in their approval of your discretion in declining this honor. And as for the Queen, I have no doubt that if she hears of your refusal of the post, she will indemnify you by offering you a position near her own royal person. And now, my love, it is necessary that you answer this immediately. Come into the library and I will direct you as to the proper form and wording of your letter of declension," said the duchess, rising from the table and leading the way.

And accordingly that afternoon a messenger was despatched to Carleton House, bearing a note with Lady Etheridge's respectful submission to the Prince and Princess of Wales, entreating their permission to decline an honor so far above her merits, and begging leave to remain their Royal Highnesses' most grateful and humble servant, etc., etc., etc.

The very same day brought invitations from the Duchesses of Devonshire, Gordon and Cumberland to various *fêtes*, to be given by their graces in the course of the next fortnight; to all of which were returned polite excuses for non-acceptance.

"I am in your hands, dear madam," said Rose to the Duchess of Beresleigh, "and will accept and decline invitations just as you advise. But oh! I do long to go and see my dear Miss Elmer."

"You can go to-morrow, my dear, if you like, and upon reflection, I advise you to go about two o'clock, which will probably be the hour of the mid-day recess, when she will be at leisure," replied her grace.

“Then I will go to-morrow, for, oh, madam, I feel towards that high-souled lady as though she were a dethroned queen, and I look upon myself as a miserable usurper, whom the mob, in some transient ascendancy over rightful authority, have raised to her throne. I know this fleeting glory of mine cannot last! ‘The *queen* shall enjoy her own again,’ and I—where shall I be? lost and forgotten in my native obscurity! But little shall I care so that the right triumphs!”

“My dear, I can scarcely understand your deeply-rooted distrust of your present prosperity. An affair decided by the House of Lords must be settled forever. But even if it were possible—though it is not—that such a reverse should overtake you, do not believe that you would be either lost or forgotten. Your personal excellences have won friends that must be true to you through good and evil fortune. But all this is idle talk. Your position is as firmly established as that of any peeress in these realms,” said the duchess, with an amused smile.

The next day, when Colonel McElroy solicited a private audience of the Prince of Wales, and laid before his royal highness the letter of Lady Etheridge, respectfully declining the post that had been offered to her, the Prince fell into a most unprincely fit of profanity, a luxury in which he only indulged in the presence of such familiars as Colonel McElroy.

“And this, then, Mac., is the result of your precious plan! You would suggest nothing more original than that I should make the beauty a lady-in-waiting upon the Princess, with apartments in the palace—a *ruse*, sir, as old as the days of the patriarchs, when Hagar, the beloved of Abraham, was the waiting-maid of his wife Sarah. I am beginning to lose my esteem for you. It was your best advice that I should offer Lady Etheridge this appointment. I *did* offer it to her. I might have known that the old Hecate of Beresleigh would counsel her to decline it. And she has declined it. What has your wisdom to say now?” said the Prince, ironically.

“Your Royal Highness will be so gracious as to recall the fact that I suggested that a meeting with this beauty might be effected at some of the *fêtes* given by your friends. The Duchess of Cumberland, for instance.”

"Pshaw ! pshaw ! pshaw !" exclaimed the Prince, impatiently. "The Duchesses of Cumberland, Gordon and Devonshire have invited this dainty beauty to their parties, and she has sent excuses to them all ! If you cannot suggest some plan more likely to succeed than the foregoing, you had better retire into private life."

"If your Royal Highness will pardon the most zealous and devoted of your servants, I *have* a plan," said the jackal.

"Ah, you have ! then let us hear it without much preface."

"It is a plan that cannot fail to bring about an interview between your Royal Highness and this young beauty."

"Then let us hear it, by all means. Why this hesitation and mystery ?"

"It is a plan that, with submission to your Royal Highness, should be discussed with closed doors, as the courts say."

"Then close the doors, and open your communication at once," said the Prince.

The jackal obeyed, and then returned to his master to divulge his second plot for getting the beautiful and innocent young baroness into the Prince's power.

CHAPTER XVII.

MORE MYSTERIES.

Between two worlds life hovers like a star,
"Twixt night and morn, upon the horizon's verge.
How little do we know that which we are,
How less that which we may be. The eternal surge
Of time and tide rolls on, and bears aloft
Our bubbles. As the old burst, new emerge,
Lashed from the foam of ages, while the graves
Of empires heave, but like some passing waves.—Byron.

It was Easter Monday, and the young ladies had a holiday. Laura Elmer sat alone in the deserted school-room, reading with much interest a review of the new poem, when Miss

Lester suddenly burst in, with a gayly bound volume in her hand, exclaiming :

“ Oh, Miss Elmer, here is the ‘Album of Beauty,’ and the frontispiece is a portrait of that beautiful Baroness Etheridge, whom every one so much admires. Only look at her. What a lovely, lovely face ! And they do say she was brought up in a cottage, like Lady Burleigh or the shepherd lord—you recollect. But, oh, do look. What a lovely, lovely face !”

And the eager child spread open the folio before her governess.

“ Thank you, dear,” said Miss Elmer, letting her languid eyes fall upon the picture.

“ And now, Miss Elmer, I thought that would amuse you while we are gone to Richmond with papa. Good-bye, dear Miss Elmer.”

And, kissing her hand, the volatile creature flew out of the room.

Laura Elmer looked down upon the steel engraving that formed the frontispiece of the “Album of Beauty.”

Yes, it was the same lovely face, the same sweet, serious young face, veiled by the same fall of fair ringlets. The attitude was pensive, the graceful head bowed like a fair lily, and resting upon the taper hand. Her costume was rich and gorgeous, as became her rank ; but the expression of her softly-closed lips and thoughtful eyes seemed to repeat the words, “ I know that this pageantry is passing away. I am but a poor player-peeress who must fret her hour upon the stage until the farce is over, and then be seen no more.”

No such thought crossed the mind of Laura Elmer as she gazed upon the fair portrait. She only asked herself :

“ Shall the world win this sweet creature ? Alas, she must be more than woman, more than human, if this sudden elevation, this dazzling success, this bewildering adulation, does not utterly spoil her. She has been in town now many weeks, and has not called to see me. Has she already forgotten her fervent expressions of friendship ?”

Miss Elmer was interrupted by a rap at the door.

“ Come in,” she said, closing and laying aside the book.

“ Good-morning, Miss Elmer. I beg you will pardon my

intrusion, and send me off if it is unseasonable," said Mr. Cassinove, entering.

"I am quite at leisure. Pray sit down," replied Laura, smiling to observe that he also had in his hand a book that he was about to offer to her notice.

He bowed, and took the proffered seat, saying :

"I have but lately become acquainted with the rare merit of a poem about which the whole literary world has been talking and writing for the last two months. You have not read it. I hope that you will permit me to recommend a work which, to a mind like yours, will richly repay perusal."

And he laid the volume before her.

Laura Elmer blushed deeply as she took it up.

"I am much indebted to you for your kindness, Mr. Cassinove. I have been reading this morning what I consider to be the best review that has yet been written upon this poem. As you like the poem, perhaps you would also like the review," she said, tendering the last number of the *Gentleman's Magazine*.

It was now Cassinove's turn to blush deeply—so deeply that, as he met the eyes of Laura Elmer, mutual consciousness flashed from eye to eye, from heart to heart, from soul to soul, suddenly revealing the truth.

"You are the reviewer," said the glance of Laura.

"And you the poet," said that of Cassinove.

The heart of the young man beat quickly. His color went and came.

"I might have known it! I might have known it! That glorious poem is but another phase of the poet woman," he thought, and what next he might have said or done is uncertain, for at that instant a door opened, and a servant announced—

"Lady Etheridge!"

And the next instant Rose was in the arms of Laura.

Cassinove, with a bow, had quietly retreated from the room.

"I did not send up my name in advance, dear Miss Elmer, because I wished so much to see you, whether you would or no. Do you forgive me?" inquired Rose, bashfully.

"Most welcome intruder, yes," replied Laura, installing her visitor in the most comfortable chair

Rose seated herself, glanced at the queenly form of Laura Elmer, arrayed in its simple dress of black serge, and the royal brow with its plain bands of black hair; then at her surroundings, the school-room, with its signs of mental drudgery, and, last of all, at her own magnificent array, and sighed deeply

"It is a long, tedious play, is it not, Miss Elmer?"

"What play, my dear?"

"This comedy of 'The Changeling,' in which they make poor Rose take the part of the baroness," she said.

"My dear, how incredulous you are of your good fortune. The history of the past twenty years was indeed a play, as far as you and I were concerned. The history of the present is a reality. Believe it, accept it, and improve it."

Rose shook her head sadly, and, pressing her hand upon her bosom, said—

"Ah, Miss Elmer! deep in my heart here I feel how unreal is all I see around me. Yes, Miss Elmer, sooner or later the poor little sparrow will be plucked of her bird-of-paradise plumage, and it will be well if she is not left to shiver and die of cold."

"This is morbid, very morbid, my dear. You really must banish such thoughts," said Laura, so gravely that Rose suddenly laughed, and said—

"But I did not come here to be lectured for croaking, Miss Elmer. I came to see you, to talk over all that has passed since we met, and especially to bring you this book."

And, to the ludicrous astonishment of Laura Elmer, Rose produced the third copy of that poem that had been offered to her.

"I thought, Miss Elmer, that you had not read it. You really should not live another day without having an opportunity of doing so, and, therefore, I stopped at Taylor's and purchased this copy on my way hither. But perhaps you have already perused it?"

"I have."

"And oh, I am sure you must admire it. It is so much like yourself, that you must admire it," said Rose, with enthusiasm.

"That would be a very egotistical reason for approving it," said Laura.

"Oh, but really, since you have read it, what do you think of it?"

"It is a very faulty piece of work," said Laura.

"Faulty," exclaimed Rose, opening her blue eyes wide in astonishment, and then, after gazing at Laura for the space of a minute, she added, "well, perhaps in your eyes it is faulty, Miss Elmer. You are, indeed, so superior to other people, that a work which they pronounce the perfection of wisdom, love and beauty, may appear to your purer vision very imperfect."

"Have you learned at court to flatter, Rose?" said Miss Elmer, flushing.

"No, nor forgot to honor where honor is due!" replied Rose, significantly. "But seriously, Miss Elmer, all the world of fashion is mad to know who this brilliant genius is. The Duchess of Beresleigh is the most impatient of all. She claims the privilege, by old custom, of being the first to present to the world any new celebrity. She says the light should not be 'hidden under a bushel, but be set upon a golden candlestick to give light to all that are in the house.' She says that if 'all is not gold that glitters, all that is gold ought to glitter.' In other words, she thinks that the whole of a poet is public property, not only his works, but his presence and conversation belongs of right to the world."

"And do you believe so?" inquired Laura.

"Yes, Miss Elmer. We do not belong to ourselves, and should not bury our talent, whatever it may be, especially if it be the power of pleasing. Now, if the presence of this unknown poet would make hundreds of other people happy, he should not conceal himself," said Rose, in a decisive manner.

"Do you act upon that principle, fair Rose, and appear wherever you are desired?"

Rose blushed vividly, and answered—

"I am in leading strings, and go only where I am drawn by the duchess."

"And her grace, of course, drew you to see your friend to-day?" said Laura, archly.

"Nay, but she sent me, which is morally the same thing; and that reminds me to tell you that the duchess would have accompanied me to see you to-day, only that she very rightly judged that you and myself must have much to talk of, and so she gave me her card for you, saying that she would be very happy to see you——"

"Or any other friend of Lady Etheridge. That is what it means, my dear."

"The duchess always means just what she says, no more nor less," said Rose.

"As you will: I am not querulous, dear. I will call to see you very soon," replied Laura.

They then fell into a familiar conversation, talking of much that had passed since they last met, which to relate would only be to repeat events with which the reader is already acquainted.

And Rose terminated her visit—the happiest visit, she declared, that she had made since coming to town.

"There are gleams of sunlight on the shadiest path," said Laura Elmer, when she was left alone; and she fell into a pleasant *reverie* that lasted until the servant came to announce the carriage for the afternoon drive.

She then quickly put on her bonnet and mantle, and went down to the front hall, where she was met by Sir Vincent and Mrs. Ravenscroft.

Laura's position towards Mrs. Ravenscroft was growing daily more embarrassing. Since the day of that unhappy young lady's rencontre with the stranger in the park, her conduct had been marked by a singular anxiety and vigilance. The present occasion was no exception to the rule, but was destined very much to complicate the duties and perplex the mind of Laura Elmer. The carriage door had scarcely closed upon them, when Helen Ravenscroft, keeping her veil down, peered anxiously through every window in turn. As the carriage rolled on, this course of watchfulness was still pursued, until at length, just as they were about to enter the park, the restless woman suddenly became still and contented.

Laura Elmer looked out, and saw the cause of this sudden change. The person whose appearance she had evidently

watched and hoped for was at hand—that is to say, the light-haired man was riding in attendance upon the carriage.

Laura Elmer's face flushed with indignation. She suddenly pulled the check-string, and ordered the coachman to turn and drive back to the house; but the man, not fully comprehending the unexpected order, only drew up, and, touching his hat, waited for further directions.

While Miss Elmer was hurriedly repeating her orders from one window, Helen Ravenscroft suddenly let down the other, and snatching a letter from her bosom, threw it out at the feet of the rider, who, leaping from his horse, picked it up, and then springing into his saddle, rode rapidly away. Helen dropped back into her seat, and burst into a horrible laugh.

"In the name of heaven, what have you done?" cried Laura Elmer, turning around in dismay.

"What Hades cannot undo! You may betray me now; tell all you know. It will be too late! too late!" replied Mrs. Ravenscroft, with a wild laugh.

"Most unhappy girl, I fear, indeed, that you have betrayed yourself. I very much regret having concealed your first encounter with that evil man from Sir Vincent Lester. And I warn you that I feel it my duty to yourself and your family, to inform him of that which I have witnessed," said Miss Elmer, gravely.

"I free you to do so, but it will be in vain! in vain! All Hades cannot undo what I have done to-day," said Helen, in exultation.

The carriage rolled rapidly back to Grosvenor-square. When they arrived they were met as usual in the hall by Sir Vincent Lester, who greeted them with much surprise, exclaiming:

"You are back early. No one is ill, I hope?"

"No, Sir Vincent; but as soon as you have disposed of your unhappy charge, I must have an interview with you," said Miss Elmer, in a peremptory manner.

"Certainly, Miss Elmer. James, show Miss Elmer into the library; I will attend upon you there immediately, Miss Elmer," said the baronet, leading away Mrs. Ravenscroft, who, in passing, turned upon the governess a look of wild defiance and triumph.

Laura Elmer went into the library, and threw herself into an easy-chair to await the coming of the baronet, who now entered

He advanced smiling, and saying :

"Miss Elmer, I feel myself much flattered by this mark of confidence. It is an honor——"

"A truce to compliments, if you please, Sir Vincent. Forgive my interruption, but I have that to communicate which may make you grave enough," said Laura Elmer, very seriously.

The baronet bowed, took a seat opposite to her, and became politely attentive.

"What I have to communicate, Sir Vincent, relates to the unhappy young lady from whom we have just parted."

"Helen Ravenscroft!" exclaimed the baronet, in alarm. "She has told you——"

"She has told me nothing, Sir Vincent. She has confided in me no more than you have."

The baronet wiped his brow, and looked inexpressibly relieved.

"I should begin, Sir Vincent, by expressing the deep regret I feel at not having informed you of an incident that occurred upon the very first occasion of my riding out with Mrs. Ravenscroft." The baronet lent a polite, but by no means anxious attention to her words so far.

Laura felt justified in watching his countenance to observe the effect of her next words. And Sir Vincent Lester possessed one of those warm, dark, rich, southern faces that are true mediums for every passing emotion of the soul.

"The first occasion upon which I drove out with Mrs. Ravenscroft, we observed that the carriage was followed by a man on horseback, and supposing the horseman might be only pursuing his own course, which might well happen to lie in the same direction as ours, I felt no misgivings as to his purposes."

Here Laura raised her eyes to Sir Vincent Lester's face. His chin was resting on his hand, his lips were firmly compressed, his brows knit, and his eyes fixed upon the speaker.

"But this man followed us quite through the park until

the carriage stopped, when he also drew up, at some little distance. opposite the window."

"This man—what was he like?" asked the baronet, in a deep, quick, gasping voice, as of one who held himself under some violent restraint.

"A handsome and gentlemanly-looking person, who managed his horse with grace and skill. That is the first impression he made upon me. Upon nearer view, a fair-complexioned man, with light hair, gentle blue eyes, full, serious lips, and a frank, kindly, genial expression of countenance."

"Go on! go on! What more?"

"This man remained uncovered and reined in his horse until his appearance attracted the attention of Mrs. Ravenscroft, who, quick as lightning, threw down the window, and stretched forth her arms, crying, in a piercing voice, 'Rayburne! Rayburne!' and would have broken from the carriage had I not used gentle coercion to force her back to her seat where, overcome by the violence of her emotions, she fainted. The man, apparently satisfied with having shown himself to her, replaced his hat upon his head, and rode away."

"And—Helen! What of her? Go on! pray go on!"

"Mrs. Ravenscroft recovered her consciousness, and without giving me any explanation of the scene that had occurred, besought me to be silent concerning it. I promised to be so, unless I should deem it essential to her happiness and welfare to divulge all that I witnessed. An incident that occurred to-day has made it incumbent upon me to give you this information."

"And that incident——?"

"Was this. I had noticed for many days that the unhappy lady, when driving out, seemed ever on the watch for the reappearance of this person. To-day he reappeared and followed the carriage. I no sooner saw him than I pulled the check string, and directed the coachman to return home, but in the interval of stopping the coach and giving the directions, Mrs. Ravenscroft suddenly snatched a letter from her bosom, threw up the window, and cast it at his feet. He dismounted, caught up the letter, vaulted into his saddle, and galloped away. I asked her what she had done

She laughed wildly, and answered, 'That which all the powers of Hades cannot undo.' And she freely defied me to tell you as much, Sir Vincent. Good heavens! Sir Vincent!' exclaimed Miss Elmer, in alarm.

The baronet's face had turned ghastly white, his head had dropped upon his chest, his arms had fallen by his sides—he seemed completely overwhelmed and crushed.

Laura Elmer looked at him in terror, and then started towards the bell-rope, when the baronet raised his hand, with the one word "Stop!"

The tone was peremptory, though the word was almost inarticulate.

Laura paused, turned, and retraced her steps towards him.

"On your life, on your soul, Miss Elmer, remain where you are!" he said; and, making a great effort, he recovered himself and sat up; and, after a little time, mastering his emotion, he arose and walked slowly up and down the floor.

He was fearful to look upon. His face was livid, his brows drawn down over eyes that gleamed and shot forth malignant rays, his chin was protruded, and his lips and teeth shut and locked as with some fatal grimness of deadly resolution.

Laura shuddered, and averted her head.

Presently, muttering to himself, he said:

"There is but one way—it must be taken."

Then, suddenly pausing before Laura, he said:

"Miss Elmer, there are times when belief in the fatalism of the Turks, and the predestinism of the Calvinists, forces itself upon my conviction, and I think that we are not only fore-doomed to commit certain crimes, but that every means will be taken to insure our doing so. Miss Elmer, I esteem and respect you, and wish to stand well with you. I pray you, therefore, whatever the next few days may bring forth, judge of me as leniently as you can—as of one who has been 'more sinned against than sinning.' And, with one final request, I will bid you good-morning; and that is, that you will speak of the events of this day to no living soul unless you should be judicially called upon to do so."

Miss Elmer gave the required promise, and retired, full of sad thoughts, from the library.

When Laura Elmer returned to her own room, she found there a packet that changed the current of her thoughts and called a smile to her lips. She cut the cords, and several handsomely bound volumes were revealed to her eyes. Sitting down, she examined one after the other, and at last, selecting the most elegant volume, bound in blue and gold, she wrapped it up, sealed and directed it to the Baroness Etheridge, Beresleigh House, and then she rang a bell and gave it to a servant to put in the post

CHAPTER XVIII.

MORE CONSPIRACIES.

Oh, conspiracy!

Where wilt thou find a cavern dark enough
To hide thy monstrous visage! Seek none, conspiracy!
Hide it in smiles and affability;
For if thou put thy native semblance on,
Not Erebus itself were dim enough
To hide thee from detection.—*Shakspeare.*

WHEN Lady Etheridge returned from her visit to Miss Elmer, and entered the drawing-room at Beresleigh House, she found the duchess and the young ladies in consultation over a set of invitations that had been left for the family.

“And there is one for you, also, my love,” said the duchess, throwing a billet to Lady Etheridge as the latter sat down at the table.

It was an invitation to a rural breakfast and masked promenade, to be given by Lady Howarth at her superb villa at Richmond.

“To go or not to go, ‘that is the question!’” said the duchess. “There has been nothing talked of since the royal drawing-room except this grand *déjeûné* and *fête masqué*. All the world will be there, and I think Lady Etheridge would like to see it. What do you say, my love?”

"Oh, certainly! the scene will be quite new to me. I never was at a masquerade."

"No, nor was I ever at a masquerade of this description before—by daylight, I mean. There is to be a breakfast at ten, and then a promenade, with music, singing, dancing, etc., for the remainder of the day," said the duchess.

"It is decided, then, that we go?" inquired Lady Katherine Wardour.

"Yes, my dear, so now, therefore, we shall have to tax our wits to invent characters and costumes. Kings, queens, monks, nuns, gipsies, and Swiss peasants are all so common, that we will none of them! We must have something new."

After much discussion it was decided that the duchess should take the character of a Roman Matron, the Ladies Wardour those of Roman Maidens, and that the young, fresh, bright beauty of Lady Etheridge would shine forth most fairly as the Morning Star.

When this was decided, the next few days were spent in deciding upon and selecting the proper costumes.

One morning, while the duchess and her daughters were still in discussion with their fancy dress-making, Rose Etheridge took up the *Times*, and read therein an announcement of a new edition of that celebrated poem, which then formed the most interesting item of conversation in the literary and fashionable world.

"Oh, how vexed I am that I did not wait a few days for this new, improved edition, before sending Miss Elmer a copy; now it will look so odd to send her a second one; nevertheless, I shall do it," said Rose.

"Is the name of the author affixed to this second edition?" inquired the duchess, anxiously.

"It is not in the advertisement; but it may be on the title-page of the book for all that. I shall call at Taylor's and get a copy when I go out to-day, and then see."

"Do so, if you please, my dear," said the duchess.

"A parcel for Lady Etheridge," said a servant, bringing in a small packet upon a silver waiter.

Rose took and opened the covering, revealing a beautiful little volume bound in blue and gold.

"It is a copy of the new edition of that poem! Who could have sent it?" exclaimed Rose.

Then quickly turning to the title-page, she burst into an exclamation of joy, with the words:

"Oh, how stupid of me! I should have known it! Why, an idiot might have known that much!"

"What is it, dear Rose?" inquired the duchess.

"Why I *ought* to have known at once who was the author of 'Woman,' and I was an idiot *not* to have known it!"

"Oh! the author's name *is* there! Who is she, then?"

"Why, Laura Elmer, of course! I was very, very dull not to have known it before!"

"Laura Elmer! Your friend, Laura Elmer! She who was brought up and educated as the Baroness Etheridge? Are you sure?" exclaimed the duchess.

"Why, of course, I am sure *now*. I *ought* to have been sure at first. Look, your grace!"

And Rose opened the volume, spreading before the duchess the title-page, upon which appeared the words, "Woman: a Poem. By Laura Elmer." And then turning a fly-leaf, she exhibited an autograph of the words—"To Rosamond, Baroness Etheridge, with the love of Laura Elmer. June 1st, 1800."

"Laura Elmer! Laura Elmer! whose education and whose antecedents fit her to adorn *any* circle, and whose genius entitles her to the very highest consideration! Katherine, my dear, sit down immediately, and write her an invitation to our party of the 10th. There is time enough yet, if you send it off immediately. I will call on her myself to-day. I hope she will soon resign her situation—it is ridiculous, a woman of *her* genius; however, I suppose genius may be said to consecrate every position; and I really must secure this new literary star for our party of the 10th! Are you writing the invitation, Katherine?"

"Yes, mamma."

"Oh, I am so overjoyed! My dear Miss Elmer! I might have known that she only could have written that poem!" exclaimed Rose, delightedly.

The duchess rang, and ordered her carriage, and then turning to Rose, said:

"I shall call on Miss Elmer this morning ; but must leave it to you to persuade her to accept our invitation of the 10th. I can well conceive that a lady of Miss Elmer's pride and delicacy may shrink from the idea of appearing in circles, which once she might have honored as the Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne, but which she can now grace only as a successful woman of genius. But she loves you, and will come to us if she can be made to feel that it will make you happy."

Rose promised to use her influence, and the duchess departed to secure the new star of poetry.

On reaching Lester House, the Duchess of Beresleigh inquired first for Lady Lester, whom she was so fortunate as to find at home.

When both the ladies were seated in the drawing-room, and had discussed the last party, the last play, and the last novel, the duchess said :

"I presume that you have found out by this, the author of 'Woman?'"

"No, I am not so fortunate. Your grace is always the first discoverer of a new star in the heavens of poetry, and I fancy it is even so in this instance," replied Lady Lester.

"And you really do not know who the poet is?"

"Really, no ; how should I?"

"Then it is because the poetess is so close to you that you overlook her."

"Who is she, then?"

"Her name is Laura Elmer," said the duchess, with quiet malice.

"Laura Elmer ! Miss Elmer ! *Our* Miss Elmer !"

"The world's Miss Elmer ; even so. But you were aware, I presume, that she it was who, brought up for twenty years to believe herself heiress of Swinburne, enjoying since the age of fifteen the title of Baroness of Etheridge, and betrothed to a gentleman of ancient family and large fortune, was suddenly, on the eve of her marriage, deprived of rank, title, wealth, bridegroom and all, by the same stroke of fate that placed her lost coronet upon the fair brow of my young friend Rosamond?"

"Is it possible! No, I did not know it, indeed. I knew, of course, that the right of the present baroness had to be confirmed by the House of Lords, and I saw frequently through the debates the name of Magdalene Elmer, deceased; but it never once occurred to me to connect the circumstances with the thought of our Miss Elmer," said Lady Lester, more surprised at all these revelations than it was her wont to be at any thing.

"We most frequently overlook the facts that lie closest to us," said the duchess; "but this is what I mean to suggest before asking for Miss Elmer. She was brought up and educated in the highest circles, as a peeress in her own right; her antecedents, her education, and her manners must therefore fit her for any drawing-room in which her poetic celebrity makes it desirable to have her. I am, therefore, even the more solicitous to secure her for our party of the 10th. But, as I wish to leave no point of etiquette unobserved (for proud and delicate spirits in adversity are more sensitive and punctilious in these respects than we are), I have directed that her invitation shall not be sent until to-morrow, that I may pay her a visit of ceremony to-day. I deemed it proper to make these explanations before asking for Miss Elmer," said the duchess, smiling, and producing her card.

Lady Lester touched the bell.

A footman appeared.

"Take this card to Miss Elmer, and say that we shall be happy to see her in the drawing-room," said Lady Lester.

The servant withdrew to obey, and Lady Lester, turning to the duchess, said—

"You will be pleased with the appearance of this young lady. She is very distinguished-looking; her manner is more than lady-like: it is imposing. I am well pleased to believe that even when we did not know her claims to consideration, she has always been treated with proper respect by this household."

The duchess smiled approval. She did not know as yet that it was impossible even for the boldest to treat Laura Elmer with any thing but respect.

In a few moments the door opened, and a tall, graceful,

dignified woman entered. Her stately form was clothed in black; her queenly head crowned only with its own bands of rich, glossy black hair; her pure pale face, large luminous eyes, and mutely eloquent lips, were full of sweetness, intellect, and dignity. Graceful in movement and gracious in manner, she advanced into the room.

"Your grace, permit me to present to you my young friend, Miss Elmer. Miss Elmer, the Duchess of Beresleigh," said Lady Lester.

"I am happy to meet one for whom I have been so long in search—the gifted poetess of 'Woman,'" said the duchess.

Laura Elmer bowed slowly and gravely to this direct compliment, and silently took her seat.

"Proud," thought the duchess, and then, resolved to melt this natural pride, she continued:

"I hold myself deeply fortunate in this meeting to-day for even while anxious to discover the unknown author of 'Woman,' I felt desirous of knowing a young lady with whose many claims to respect my friend Lady Etheridge had made me familiar."

Laura smiled ambiguously, saying—

"Lady Etheridge is very good. Her version of certain calamities may have interested you, as they might have done other benevolent hearts, in the subject of such strange reverses."

"Nay, it was not so much the reverses, strange and calamitous as they were, but the manner in which they were met and borne, that interested me in their subject. A dethroned queen would never interest me from the mere fact of her dethronement, but from the heroism with which she would bear such a misfortune."

Again Laura Elmer only answered by bowing deeply and gravely.

The duchess lowered her voice, and said, gently:

"A truce to these comparisons, which I see are not to your taste. You have lost the transient golden coronet of a peeress, that you must at last have laid down at death, but you have won the immortal bay wreath of the poet, that must be yours forever."

The perfect sincerity of this encomium might be said to justify its directness. Nevertheless, Laura Elmer blushed intensely, and recovering herself, answered, in grave sweetness :

“And yet the golden circlet is a harmless bauble, while the bay wreath bears a poisoned leaf, and when set upon a woman’s brow, is also twined with the crown of thorns, whose pressure tracks with her own life’s current every footstep up the heights of fame.”

“A poet’s thought eloquently uttered,” said the duchess, sinking into a brief revery.

When the conversation revived there was no resisting the determined affability of the duchess, even though she fell into the amiable error often committed by persons of high rank, towards the sensitive children of genius, that is to say, into an excessive graciousness of condescension, than which nothing can be more wounding to a proud and delicate spirit.

And Laura Elmer, on her part, might have been in danger of making the corresponding mistake of interpreting this extreme politeness and direct flattery as the covert insolence of rank, only that the perfect sincerity of her grace shone through all her discourse.

On rising to take her leave, the duchess said :

“I hope to see you frequently at Beresleigh House, my dear Miss Elmer. My son and daughter will be happy to know you, and your coming will always delight our guest, your friend, Lady Etheridge.”

“I thank you, madam. I shall be very happy,” replied Laura Elmer. And so the visit terminated.

“She is the very Queen of Poetry. She will make a decided sensation. I shall have the two brightest stars, namely, of beauty and of genius, in my drawing-room on the 10th,” said the duchess, when she had reached home, and found herself alone with Lady Etheridge.

“Oh, is she not? I told you so!” exclaimed Rose, with a face beaming with delight.

“I hope she understands her points, and knows how to dress herself. Oddly enough these poetesses costume their ideal characters beautifully, but never know how to array

themselves. I suppose they never give their minds to the necessary details of millinery; that must be it. I wish I dared send my maid to her. Now, I know exactly what her dress ought to be. It should be purple velvet, with point lace, and pearls in her hair. I wish some fairy grandmother would dress her so for our party," said the duchess.

"Oh! you need not doubt her, madam; her taste in dress, as in all other things, is perfect," said Rose, with enthusiasm.

The event justified the confident prediction. On the evening of the 10th, the beauty and fashion of the town were assembled at Beresleigh House. The duchess had informed many of her friends, who had told all the others, that the new star, the unknown poetess, would be present. And among other interesting subjects of conversation, the expected arrival of Miss Elmer was discussed.

At length were successively announced the names:

"Lady Lester," "Mr. Ruthven Lester," and "Miss Elmer." And the party entered.

Every one knew the Lesters. The queenly woman, on the arm of Lady Lester could, therefore, only be Miss Elmer. All eyes were turned towards her. The duchess felt that she need not have trembled for her *protégée's* costume. It was the perfection of propriety, suiting to a degree, the season, the occasion, and the person of the wearer. Her graceful form was arrayed in a rich black velvet robe, made low in the bosom and short in the sleeves; her beautiful neck and arms were veiled with white point lace, fine as cobwebs, and adorned with circlets of pearls; a fillet of pearls bound her raven black hair away from her broad forehead, so that it fell in a glittering cascade of ringlets at the back of her neck.

A murmur of irrepressible admiration greeted her appearance, as Lady Lester conducted her through the drawing-rooms toward the place where the duchess stood to welcome her guests.

The facts of her antecedents, as well as of her present social rank, were unknown or ignored. That she was Laura Elmer, the poetess, patronized by the Duchess of Beresleigh, and by Lady Lester, was deemed a sufficient passport to the favor of the most exclusive conservator of rank present. That her

beauty, dress, and address were all of a very high order, ~~was~~ another recommendation, though probably a less important one.

The kindness of the Duchess of Beresleigh towards Laura Elmer sprang equally from her grace's well-known admiration of genius, and her sincere esteem of Miss Elmer's personal character.

The kindness of Lady Lester in the same direction, originated in less pure motives. Her ladyship courted Laura Elmer, not as the gifted poetess or the excellent woman, but as the intimate and influential friend of Lady Etheridge, whose wealthy alliance she desired for her son Ruthven.

The high consideration of the Duchess of Beresleigh and Lady Lester, springing from opposite motives as it did, was, nevertheless, the best introduction Laura Elmer had to the society in which she found herself.

The duchess received her with distinguished favor, and immediately presented her to those friends who stood nearest her own person.

Lady Lester and Mr. Ruthven Lester never relaxed their polite attentions, and Laura Elmer became the lioness of the evening.

Meanwhile, where were her thoughts?

Far off, with one at home, who, in his little attic-den, bent a pale and patient brow over a ponderous law-book—with one whose silent worship had been deeply felt and long acknowledged. And through all the triumph of that evening, Laura Elmer looked forward with impatience to the hour that should take her home, and to the slight chance of meeting Cassinove's mournful dark eyes, and placing her hand in his with a friendly "Good-night," before retiring to her room.

Meanwhile, Mr. Ruthven Lester, leaving his mother to cultivate the good graces of Miss Elmer, devoted himself to the beautiful Lady Etheridge.

Rose listened absently to the graceful nothings dropped into her weary ear by the handsomest man in town, while her eyes covertly sought out the Duke of Beresleigh, who, leaving her to be monopolized by Mr. Ruthven Lester, directed his own courtesies very impartially among the ladies of the ~~room~~ party.

"Ah, me! there is always some drawback to all one's earthly enjoyments! What have I done that *he* should avoid me so persistently?" sighed Rose, to herself.

"How will she pass this ordeal of adulation? Oh! would it were over, and that I were free to offer her the love that consumes my heart," groaned George, Duke of Beresleigh, to himself, as he covertly watched the centre of a worshipping circle of attendants.

The brilliant evening, with its little world of successes, failures, triumphs, defeats, heart-burnings and heart-bleedings, came to an end.

The company dispersed.

Rose, weary of her triumphs, mourning over her one supposed failure, sought her chamber, threw herself into her chair, snatched the tiara of diamonds from her brow, and exclaimed:

"Oh, life! life! life! brilliant, mocking! how hollow and unsatisfying thou art!"

Laura Elmer, in returning home with the Lesters, was occupied with one thought.

"Shall I see Cassinove to-night, and bid him 'Good-night,' before we retire?"

Her secret hope was gratified. He was standing in the hall when they entered.

Lady Lester was in great good-humor, and came in complimenting Miss Elmer. Seeing Mr. Cassinove, she said:

"Ah, Mr. Cassinove, you should have seen what a sensation our friend created at the Duchess of Beresleigh's party to-night. Congratulate her, sir."

"The Duchess and her friends are rather to be congratulated, madam," said Mr. Cassinove, gravely and sweetly, as he bowed to Laura Elmer.

Their eyes met.

"The approbation of one esteemed friend is better than the admiration of the whole world beside," said Laura Elmer, in a tone that made his heart thrill with joy.

"Good-night," she said, holding out her hand, receiving and returning the slight pressure that sent him happier to his rest

Laura Elmer retired to her room ; but the adventures of the night were not yet over. In her life of isolation and solitude she had formed the habit of reading in her chamber every night until she became sleepy. For this purpose she always kept a volume on hand. The book now in progress of perusal happened to be "Ivanhoe." Feeling too much excited by the events of the day to go at once to sleep, Laura looked about for her book, without being able to find it. Then suddenly recollecting that she had left it in the drawing-room below stairs, and feeling the more anxious to read it because it happened to be out of her way, she threw on her dressing-gown, took a taper, and went softly down the stairs to re-possession herself of her missing treasure. The house was quite still ; the world seemed buried in the deep repose of the still small hours.

As she reached the lower landing a sudden draught from the library door, that stood open immediately on the left at the foot of the staircase, blew out the taper. At the same moment, the sight within that library spell-bound her to the spot with astonishment. The lights were all out, but, by the smouldering fire of the grate, she saw the figures of two men seated at the writing-table near the rug. The one with his face fronting the fire-place was Sir Vincent Lester, and even in the red and lurid light of the dying fire his face was ghastly pale, his brows were corrugated, and great drops of agony were beaded upon his forehead.

The other figure sat with his back towards the door, and, consequently, his face was hidden from Laura Elmer ; but by the general contour of his form, and by the peculiar air of his head, and especially by his light hair, she recognized him as the mysterious stranger who had twice met Mrs. Ravenscroft in the park, and whose relations with the family of Sir Vincent seemed, too, as baleful as they were inexplicable.

It took but one instant to impress this strange scene upon the brain of Laura Elmer, and then deeply shocked by what she had inadvertently witnessed, she turned hastily to retrace her steps to her chamber.

In her hurried retreat, a few words from the library reached her ear, the first from Sir Vincent Lester, in a voice half-suffocated with emotion.

"For *her* sake, then ; she loves you."

A derisive laugh from the other was the only reply

"Oh, heaven ! you would not destroy her !" burst in anguish from Sir Vincent.

"I will give you ten days, and then——"

Laura heard no more ; she had passed out of the reach of the voices.

She gained the privacy of her own room, and with no disposition either to sleep or to read, retired to rest.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MASKED BREAKFAST AND PROMENADE.

The music, and the banquet, and the wine—
 The garlands, the rose odors, and the flowers—
 The sparkling eyes and flashing ornaments—
 The white arms and the raven hair—the braids
 And bracelets ; swan-like bosom, and the necklace,
 An India in itself ; yet dazzling not
 The eye, like what it circled : the thin robes,
 Floating like light clouds, 'twixt our gaze and heaven.
 All the illusions of the dizzy scene,
 Its false and true enchantments—Art and Nature.—*Byron.*

THE long-looked-for day of Lady Howarth's rural breakfast and promenade at her superb villa at Richmond came at length.

At an early hour the Duchess of Beresleigh and her party, consisting of the Baroness Etheridge and the Ladies Wardour, entered their carriages to proceed to the scene of Arcadian festivity.

The morning drive from London to Richmond, along the banks of the beautiful Thames, through sunny meadows and shady groves, in all the luxuriant verdure of an early summer time, was the purest enjoyment of natural scenery that Rose had experienced since leaving her beautiful home at Swinburne Castle.

It was nearly twelve o'clock when they reached the villa, an elegant mansion of white stone, crowning a commanding height above the river. Behind the house stood a tall, close, well-kept wood; before it rolled a green lawn, in all the dewy freshness of June, and adorned by grand old oak-trees, standing singly or in groups, at various distances, between the mansion house and the water's edge.

The lawn presented a strange and grotesque scene. Such anachronisms of history and geography, such solecisms of rank and caste of politics and religion, might have afflicted the uninitiated beholders with temporary insanity. It was covered with a multitude of people in the costumes of all countries, all ages, and all classes; here were fantastic kings and queens of ancient and modern times, of savage and civilized nations, met upon familiar terms; here, if all unity of time and place was confounded, all discord of principle and opinion was harmonized; here the Jewish High Priest of the age of Tiberius walked side by side with the English Quakeress of to-day; a chief of the North American Indians promenaded with a Princess of the Court of Louis le Grand; a Sultan of Turkey flirted with two Nuns of Spain; a Thug of farther India sat down with a Sister of Mercy; even His Holiness the Pope might have been seen sauntering along, flanked by a Brigand on his right hand, and a Brigadier on his left, and in occasional friendly conversation with a terrific black mask said to be his Satanic Majesty; while monks, gipsies, bandits, peasants, etc., of all countries and ages wandered about singly, or in pairs, trios, quartettes, or groups.

The Duchess of Beresleigh was dressed as a Roman Matron, the Ladies Wardour as Roman Maidens.

Lady Etheridge, as Aurora, was beautifully arrayed in a floating cloud-like robe of azure and rose-colored gauze. A single diamond, like the morning star, blazed upon her fair forehead, and a large veil, like a silvery morning mist, covered her form. Her dress, her figure, and her graceful motions excited universal admiration as she passed, but the close black velvet mask concealed her lovely features.

The scene, so novel and so entertaining, engaged her youth-

ful fancy She knew that under those various and grotesque disguises the aristocracy, celebrity, beauty, and fashion of the town, were present.

Some, from the peculiarity of their figure, gait, and manner, the duchess was enabled to identify and point out to her young charge.

"That fine-looking woman, dressed as the Goddess Diana, is the beautiful Duchess of Devonshire, my love."

"Yes; there is no mistaking her graceful carriage. But who is that stately woman in the character of Cleopatra?"

"I think the Margravine of Anspach; there is the Margrave, as Marc Antony."

"And that oriental-looking beauty, dressed as a Sultana?"

"Hush! speak low! one, my dear, who bartered her woman's fame for a prince's fickle favor, and lost both—the celebrated Mrs. Fitzherbert."

Rose crimsoned and became silent.

The lady's name, for praise and blame, had blown far over England, and reached even Rose's distant home. Rose walked on in embarrassed silence, until the ever-changing kaleidoscopic scene again raised her curiosity.

"Oh, can you tell me who that veiled beauty, dressed as an Eastern Princess, and wafting all the perfumes of Arabia as she walks, can be?"

"Yes; she is the beautiful Mrs. Bristow, lately returned from Constantinople. She has taken the character of 'Nour-mahal, the Harem's Light.' You remember the Feast of Roses, in 'Lalah Rookh?'"

"Yes."

They passed on. Breakfast tables, covered with all the luxuries of the season, were set at intervals about the lawn. A large number of masked figures in white dominoes, officiated as masters of the ceremonies, and stood in readiness to marshal the guests to the tables. It was rumored that they only awaited the arrival of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, who was to honor the *fête* with his presence.

This was the first the Duchess of Beresleigh had heard of the anticipated presence of the prince, and the rumor somewhat disturbed her; but she consoled herself with the

thought that, in a crowd of five hundred people, her party might easily escape royal notice.

A little after one o'clock, an agitation that moved the multitude as the winds sway the waves of the sea, announced that the prince had arrived, though where he was could be known only to his hostess and the very few others who were in the secret of his disguise.

The signal was given for breakfast, and the masters of the ceremonies began to arrange the guests at the various tables. The masks were not laid aside even during that long feast, which made the business of eating and drinking rather inconvenient and awkward.

At the close of the breakfast the tables were swept away as if by magic, and the real business and pleasure of the day commenced.

Music, dancing, waltzing, games, and singing went forward everywhere over the grounds and in the house.

The duchess and her party remained as spectators only, not wishing to enter into the active amusements of a company where all the figures were masked, and most of them quite unknown.

At length an enterprise was opened in which the duchess thought herself and party might safely join. A number of young children, dressed as fairies, and without masks, came around among the guests to distribute tickets for a grand lottery, to be drawn at the villa at four o'clock.

The duchess, her daughters, and Lady Etheridge took tickets; and as the hour of drawing was near at hand, they repaired to the house. A crowd was already around the wheel. Many blanks, with a few trifling prizes, were drawn. The crowd of ticket-holders, and also of uninterested spectators, poured into the house, filling up the halls and rooms. The second prize was drawn by the Duchess of Gordon—it was an emerald ring of great value. The crowd pressed near to see it, and Lady Etheridge felt herself forcibly separated from the Duchess of Beresleigh, and pressed onwards towards the wheel. Her number was called out. Expectation was on the *qui vive*. She drew, and obtained the first prize—a gold locket set around with diamonds of inestimable value.

She blushed deeply at her success, and turned the jewels as if in search of the secret of unfastening it, when she felt herself touched upon the shoulder. She turned, and saw a lady, masked, and in the costume of Minerva, with helmet, shield, and spear, standing near her, who stooped, and whispered :

"It opens with a spring; press the diamond there under the ring, and it will fly open; but do not open it here."

Rose, disturbed by being addressed by a stranger, looked around for her party, but could not see them anywhere. The crowd had entirely cut her off from their company.

"You are in search of the Duchess of Beresleigh? I will conduct you to her side," said the masked lady.

"Thank you; I shall be very much obliged," answered Rose.

"Follow me, then, if you please," said the unknown, leading the way—first through the drawing-room, where the lottery had just been ended, thence through a room fitted up with musical instruments of every description, and in which a number of opera singers were performing, for the amusement of a portion of the company, to the door of an adjoining apartment, which she opened, saying :

"The Duchess has gone into this room to rest and refresh herself: enter, and you will find her."

Rose crossed the threshold, and found herself in a luxurious apartment, fitted up in the Turkish style, with ottomans, cushions, and other voluptuous accessories. In the midst of the room stood a richly gilded table, laden with rare wines, fruits, jellies, sweetmeats, etc. There was no one in the apartment, and Rose looked around, expecting the re-appearance of the Duchess of Beresleigh. Supposing that she had, perhaps, only retired for a few moments, Rose felt no uneasiness, but seating herself upon an ottoman, touched the spring of the locket for the purpose of examining it. The case flew open, and revealed the miniature of the prince, set in brilliants. On the reverse side were the words—*L'Amour est l'Ange du Monde*.

Flushing with confusion and alarm, Rose turned to leave the room and seek the duchess elsewhere, when her purpose

was prevented by the entrance of a mask in the costume of Phœbus Apollo, who advanced towards her, saying :

“Apollo greets Aurora, the Sun salutes the Morning Star.”

“The Morning Star always disappears with the rising of the Sun,” answered Rose, gliding towards the door.

“Nay, pause, beautiful one ! He is no stranger that addresses you. Behold !” And the unknown lifted his mask, revealing his features.

“The prince !”

The heart of Rose beat with agitation and terror ; yet controlling herself by a great effort, she courtesied deeply to the heir of the crown, and speaking with the most respectful coldness, she said :

“I am fortunate in having this opportunity of returning to your royal highness a jewel which could only have reached my hands through the greatest mistake.”

And she laid the locket on the table before him, and turned to leave the room.

But he took her hand, and reseated her upon the ottoman, saying :

“Nay, retain the gift, most beautiful Rose, and behold the giver at your feet.”

And then, with the grace, fervor, and eloquence of which he was the perfect master, he told, to perhaps the hundredth hearer, the oft-repeated tale of his unchangeable love—a prince’s love.

“‘A prince’s love !’ a prince’s insult ! an insult as deep, coming from your royal highness, as though it had been offered by the lowest hind in your dominions !” exclaimed Lady Etheridge, indignantly, as she arose to depart.

“Stay, enchanting girl ! Even your severity does but make you the more charming. Anger is the severest test of beauty, and your beauty bears it well. You are divine in anger. Hear me, then. I know that you are the last Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne, but——”

“If I were the humblest cottage-girl in England my answer should be the same. Will your royal highness be pleased to let me pass ?”

“One moment, lovely girl ! I was about to say that I

know you are the Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne, and that there is little that even a prince can offer to exalt your station; but if the rank of an English duchess would win one smile from those cherub lips, it should be yours."

"And if your royal highness could offer me the rank of a princess, my answer must still be the same. If there be those who think 'the splendor consecrates the crime,' of such am not I. No crown would become a woman's brow *discrowned* of honor!" said Rose, with generous indignation.

The prince continued to gaze upon the beautiful young monitress, but the expression of his countenance had changed from admiration to wonder and reverence. No one ever felt a deeper veneration for virtue, whenever he found it, than this naturally honorable but much perverted prince. Something in the changed expression of his face appealed deeply to the moral sensibilities of Rose. She spoke as from inspiration.

"Your royal highness has wounded my ears with words that have grieved and humiliated me beyond measure; but if, in the grief and vexation of my soul, I have forgotten the distance between the subject and the son of her sovereign, and replied with more warmth than respect, I earnestly entreat your pardon, and solicit your permission to speak a few words of sober truth, a thing, I am told, that seldom reaches the ears of princes."

"Go on, fair preacher. Truth can never be unlovely or unwelcome, presented by so beautiful an advocate."

"You are the prince, the heir of the crown, the hope, the stay, the example of a great nation; your rank is royal, your person sacred. Oh, prince! be princely! Be all that is meant in that word princely. After we have said of a model man that he is wise, good and great; that he is brave, generous, and magnanimous, we say, as the superlative of all this, that he is *princely*. Oh, prince! BE PRINCELY!"

And so saying, with her beautiful countenance exalted to fervid enthusiasm, Lady Etheridge passed from the room, while the eyes of the prince followed her with a gaze full of admiration, wonder, and reverence.

He did not again attempt to detain her; persuasion, not force, was the weapon of the prince.

This admiration of her virtues only strengthened his desire to win her heart. He pulled the bell-rope impatiently, and a page entered.

"Send my equerry hither," was the order of his royal highness.

The page bowed low and disappeared.

A few minutes elapsed, and Colonel M'Elroy entered the presence with a deep reverence.

The prince regarded him with an angry and sarcastic expression, saying:

"I have to congratulate you, sir, on the eminent success of your *second* stratagem!"

"Your royal highness has at least received a private interview with the lady; which was all that I could pledge myself for," replied the equerry, bending lowly.

"And this is the result!" said the prince, angrily, taking up and throwing down the locket. "She has returned my gift with a gratuitous lecture."

"Perhaps a more costly offering would have been more successful."

"I do not believe she can be bought!"

"Pardon me, your royal highness did not, perhaps, bid high enough."

"I do not believe she can be bought!" angrily repeated the prince.

"Pardon, once more, your royal highness; but one who knew this world right well, declared that every *man* had his price, and *I* have never yet met the *woman* who had not hers. It is but a question of more or less expense, of shorter or longer time."

"I offered her the rank of a duchess."

"She is likely to obtain *that* honorably, and without the aid of your royal highness."

"What, then, was left for me to do? I could not tempt her, as I did Fitzherbert, with the rank of a princess and the prospective rank of a queen."

"No, your royal highness; it is rather too late in the day for that."

"What, then, was to be done? What the deuce do you

mean by your talk of the conquest of this woman being a matter of more or less expense, and of shorter and of longer time? I care nothing for expense, but a great deal for time! I must win that girl, whatever it may cost, M'Elroy! but I must win her *soon*! By my soul, she is the most enchanting creature I ever saw! Tell me, what is to be done?"

"If your royal highness would trust *me*——"

"What! after *two* failures?"

"With submission to your royal highness, I would humbly suggest that this second stratagem has scarcely been a failure on *my* part, since it has accomplished all that it promised—a private interview with the lady, an opportunity of pleading your cause to her alone."

"That is true: and if my pleadings proved unsuccessful, you are not to be blamed, I suppose?" said the prince.

M'Elroy bowed in answer, adding:

"Nor should your royal highness be discouraged with the manner in which the lady met your advances. She was unprepared, surprised; she was not, perhaps, so accustomed to be wooed as your royal highness is to winning, and, perhaps, you had not discovered her *price*."

"Then, why the deuce do you not discover it for me?" What else do I keep you for?" demanded the provoked prince.

"To serve your royal highness to the best of my poor ability, as becomes your humble servant. And, if your royal highness will deign to leave this affair exclusively in my hands, giving me authority to conduct it as I see fit, I think I can pledge myself to bring it to a successful issue."

"Then I give you a *carte blanche* to do as you please in this matter, with one proviso, that you do nothing unworthy of the prince."

"On *my* head be it if I do!" exclaimed this zealous and unscrupulous instrument of the royal pleasures and vices, as he mentally formed, against the peace and honor of Lady Etheridge, a plan the most diabolical that ever entered the head of man or fiend.

Meantime, the subject of this plot, hurrying through the music-room and through the drawing-rooms, everywhere

sought the Duchess of Beresleigh, whom she found at last at the hall door.

"Well, my love, I have been seeking you all over the house and the grounds for the last two hours; but believing you to be most probably within the villa, I took my position here like any porter, as the most likely place to see you as you should pass out. But what on earth is the matter? You are pale and trembling. You are agitated. You are ill. What has happened to alarm or distress you, my love?" exclaimed the duchess on observing the greatly disturbed appearance of Rose.

"Oh, madam, let us go hence! let us return home at once!" exclaimed Rose, excitedly.

"Willingly; it has been a pleasant day upon the whole, but I, also, am quite tired. I will not ask you for an explanation of your distress until we have reached the privacy of your own dressing-room at Beresleigh House," said her grace.

The carriages were ordered, and the duchess and her party prepared to return.

While they stood waiting, the duchess sought to cheer her drooping young friend. Pointing to the beautiful and varied landscape of hill and dale, and grove and river, all bathed in the clear sunlight of a June afternoon, she said—

"Do but look up, Rose. What a glorious day! With what a lively green the fields and groves are clothed; how deeply blue and clear the sky, how high the dome of heaven."

Rose looked, and heaved a sigh.

"Ah, madam, so I thought when we came out this morning. Now, alas! I might say with Hamlet, that 'It goes so heavily with my disposition, that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air—look you—this brave, o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof, fretted with golden fire—why it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors.'"

The carriages now came up; the duchess and her party entered, and were driven home to Beresleigh House.

Her grace lost no time in seeking Lady Etheridge in her dressing-room of the latter.

"Now, my love, that we are alone, you may tell me what so distressed you at the villa."

"Oh, madam, an event that makes it necessary that I should beg your grace to absolve me from my promise of spending the season with you, and to sanction my immediate return to Swinburne Castle," said Rose, excitedly.

"Explain, my love," said the duchess.

Lady Etheridge, with deep blushes, commenced, and related the details of her enforced interview with the prince.

"Ah, I see it all now. The breakfast, the masked promenade, the lottery, all was got up for the especial purpose of bringing about your meeting with his royal highness. There are men and women, too, I am sorry to say, of the highest rank, who thus lend themselves to the purposes of royalty. You are right, my love, we must leave town; but we shall turn not to Swinburne Castle, but to Beresleigh Court, where I shall still claim you as my guest," said the duchess.

And this course was immediately decided upon. But an unforeseen event that shall be related in the next chapter, prevented the contemplated journey, and turned the fate of our heroine.

CHAPTER XX.

THE AMBUSH.

Bid her remember that the ways of Heaven,
 Though dark, are just; that oft some guardian power
 Attends unseen to save the innocent!
 But if high Heaven decrees her fall, oh, bid her
 Firmly to wait the stroke; prepared alike
 To live or die!

—*Barbarossa.*

THE next morning, while Lady Etheridge was engaged in giving directions to her maid in regard to the safe keeping of her costly jewelry, preparatory to her journey into the country, a letter was laid before her, which, opening, she found to be the appointment of herself as maid of honor to the queen.

with a command to her to repair immediately to Windsor, where the court was then residing.

With the letter in her hand, Rose went to the dressing-room of the duchess, and, being admitted, put it into her hands.

"My dear, this is fortunate. You need not now leave town; the court of Queen Charlotte will be a refuge," said the duchess, with a smile.

Rose answered that smile with a brighter one. Young, beautiful, wealthy, and noble—queen of beauty and of fashion in her first London season, she was well pleased to be delivered from the necessity of leaving town at the very acme of her social triumph.

"You need not countermand your packing, my dear, as you must take your wardrobe to Windsor with you, of course," said the duchess.

"When should I leave?" inquired Rose.

"To-morrow afternoon, at farthest. I shall go down in a few days after you. Now, run away and superintend your preparations."

And the interview closed.

The evening of the same day a tall, thin, dark figure of a man, with his coat-collar turned up and his hat pulled low over his brow, might have been seen treading some of the narrowest courts and alleys in one of the most crowded parts of central London. He paused before a great dilapidated house, that had, in the olden times, been the town mansion of a proud prelate; but, long fallen from its high estate, was a tenement crowded with beggars, tramps, and thieves, who, after pursuing, all day long, their nefarious trades through the streets, retired here at night, some to eat, drink, and sleep, some to concoct new plans of robbery, and others to hide from the pursuit of the law, for as yet the character of this house was unknown to the police, and its mouldering walls yet afforded sure refuge for fugitives.

"Disgusting place! What ever can Roberts be hiding for now? For nothing that has brought him much profit, or he would not be perdu here; he would get out of the country," said the man, as he entered the wide, open hall door, and

picked his way, loathingly, along a lofty passage and up a broad staircase, common to all the tenants of the building, and as filthy as the foulest outside alley, or the most neglected stable-yard. The only modification was that on every successive landing, the dirt was a little less thick and moist, as though the adhering contaminations from without had gradually fallen off from ascending footsteps. From the open doors of every room in this house, squalid children tumbled in and out, and the querulous voices of angry, drunken, or suffering men and women were heard.

Through all this the visitor passed up to the third floor, and turned to a door on the right, and gave a peculiar rap.

"Come in," said a very pleasant, manly voice.

The visitor entered a large front room, dark, dingy, and scantily furnished, yet free from the dirt that defiled the lower rooms and passages.

"Eh! what the deuce, Roberts; that was your voice, but where are you?" inquired he, looking about him, in the semi-obscurity of the apartment.

"Here," answered the same clear, soft voice, as the owner emerged from some dark corner and opened the window shutters, letting in a sufficiency of light to reveal the room and its meagre furniture—a large four-posted bed, with dark and tattered green curtains, a worm-eaten oak table, rickety chairs, and so forth.

The occupant was a well-dressed, handsome, fair-haired man, with a sweet, happy, and candid expression of countenance.

"Welcome, most noble Mac, to the old palace of the lord bishops of Ely. It is many centuries since the followers of a court honored its halls with their presence," said the inmate of this room, advancing to meet his visitor.

"Eh, good heavens, William, what has brought you, the greatest epicurean in town, to this beastly place?" exclaimed the visitor, in dismay.

"Necessity, good Mac; necessity which knows no law. But I may ask, in my turn, what brings the most assiduous courtier of the day into this same 'beastly' place?"

"Remotely, the same necessity; proximately your note of this morning."

"Aye, my note. I wrote to you by a trusty messenger to send me ten pounds; I thought you would have sent it."

"I chose to bring it. I have been for days in search of you, and considered myself very lucky this morning in receiving your note."

"Even though it cost you ten pounds," laughed the fair-haired man.

"Even so," said the other, going to the door and securing it. Then, returning to the side of William Roberts, he said—

"I wish to engage you in an enterprise of some danger, but much profit."

"You know, Mac," said the soft-spoken man, "that *danger* is a decidedly objectionable element in any enterprise in which I am to be engaged."

"Oh, I know, William, that courage is not among your vices, but avarice is certainly one of your noblest virtues; and this adventure, if it has the least spice of danger, has also the largest promise of profit."

"Explain."

"I will, darkly. For instance, a certain nobleman has become desperately enamored of a certain beautiful girl, without parents or guardians to protect her. He cannot marry the girl upon account of our national prejudice in favor of a man having but one wife, and she is not to be won on any other terms. To-morrow afternoon this girl takes a journey to Windsor in a post-chaise, with no attendant but her maid and footman. She must be waylaid and carried off."

The fair-haired, soft-spoken man shook his head, murmuring—

"Ugly business! ugly business! Is your nobleman privy to this proceeding?"

"Nay, now, William, you do not show your usual perspicacity. My lord will do nothing, and permit nothing to be done, unworthy of a—nobleman."

"But yet he would avail himself of any circumstance that placed this girl in his power?"

"Nay, I do not even say that; but what I say is, that I shall place this beauty in his power, and give him the oppor-

tunity and the choice of playing the desperate lover or the magnanimous hero."

"Perilous! but what aid do you require from me personally?"

"Such aid only as shall make you 'personally' perfectly safe. You must engage six or eight of your most resolute companions. They must start for Windsor to-morrow morning, and go on until they reach Hounslow Heath. There, at some convenient place, they must disguise and mask themselves, and lie in wait for the post-chaise containing this girl and her servants, stop it, bind the servants, and carry off the girl. This must be effected without bloodshed, and with as little violence as possible."

"Difficult, my dear Mac! very difficult! But my own part seems to be very easy—only to send down these fellows, and, I suppose, be their paymaster."

"Nay, not quite so easy as that, either, William. You and I must go down to Hounslow Heath, a little farther on towards Windsor, say in that piece of wood half a mile from the 'Magpie,' and rescue this young lady from the ruffians."

"Rescue her? I don't understand! Why in the world should she be carried off if we are to rescue her?"

"Simply for that very purpose—that we may rescue her. This enamored nobleman of whom I speak is a man of the highest honor. He would never countenance violence. If your ruffians, for instance, after carrying off the beauty, were to carry her to him, she would be sent back in honor to her friends, and they would be transported for their pains. But if you and myself should be so fortunate as to rescue this beauty from the hands of the robbers, at a spot near the country house owned by this nobleman, and carry her to that house as a safe refuge for the night, there is no law of honor to prevent my lord from receiving her with the most exigent hospitality, and rewarding her gallant deliverers with princely munificence."

"With 'princely munificence!' I understand it all now, my dear Mac."

"Pray understand no more than is necessary to carry out our plans, which you see have only the least flavor of the

spice of danger for your friends, and none at all for yourself. You have only to help me to rescue a young lady from the power of thieves, who will be instructed only to make a show of resistance. You will have all the glory and profit, and none of the danger."

"Humph! And this profit, dear Mac?"

"Five hundred pounds, when the lady is safe at Howlet Close, the country-house of which I spoke."

"I am your man, dear Mac. And now, as it is dark enough without for me to emerge from my inner obscurity, I will go out and beat up the necessary recruits. You can find me in this room again to-morrow morning, dear Mac, for, like ghosts that 'visit the glimpses of the moon,' I have to get back into my grave, this house, as soon as it is light without. Ah, Mac! times have changed since you and I served together in the 45th. I have gone—down, down, down; you—up, up, up. I hide in the darkness of an old rookery; you bask in the sunshine of a court."

"It is your own fault, William. You have twice the genius that I have, but you are too effeminate, too much afraid of labor, pain, and danger. What you would do must be done in profound secrecy, and is done with so much caution and hesitation as to defeat its purpose. If you had an enemy, William, that you were obliged to get rid of, you would not challenge him and run him through the body, as I should, because you would not like to see his blood flow, and would very much dislike to have your own spilled. No, you would get rid of your enemy by administering to him some slow, sweet poison, that should bring on a gentle decline, and easy, painless death. Nay, I could even imagine you sitting by the bed, smoothing the pillows, and soothing the last hours of that enemy whom you had so gently conducted to death—you are so benevolent as well as so effeminate."

The fair-haired man smiled softly and brightly, murmuring—

"You were always a flatterer, dear Mac; even before you dreamed of becoming a courtier."

They shook hands and parted.

"A desperate crisis when a man feels himself driven to an

act for which he does not know whether he shall be rewarded or reviled," murmured the personage called Mac, as he descended the stairs.

* * * * *

That same evening the Duchess of Beresleigh and her family were due at Lester House, where Lady Lester received her "dear five hundred friends." They went early, intending to return early. And, again, the two young women—the antipodes of the social world—met, to be the rival stars of the assembly—Rosamond, Lady Etheridge of Swinburne, a snow-white, golden-haired, blue-eyed, and rosy-lipped beauty; and Laura Elmer, the governess, a tall, dark, brilliant brunette and genius—the poetess of the day.

The humble position of Miss Elmer was not known or suspected beyond the families of Beresleigh and Lester.

Lady Lester, as I said, patronized Miss Elmer as the influential friend of the Baroness of Etheridge, and society accepted Miss Elmer at the hands of Lady Lester.

That evening, as usual, the Duke of Beresleigh avoided Lady Etheridge, leaving her to be attended and followed by a troop of adorers, while he himself divided his attentions impartially among the ladies of his acquaintance present.

Rose was principally surrounded by aspiring bachelors and widowers, and their anxious mothers and sisters; and Laura by old *littérateurs*, who were, with an odd mixture of curiosity, jealousy, and admiration, welcoming a new-comer into their Olympian sphere, and by others who, without having any literary jealousy or matrimonial designs, simply delighted in the conversation of a brilliant woman, or were proud of a poetical celebrity.

Sir Vincent Lester was present, but looking so ill and so pre-occupied, as to draw upon himself the notice and the softly murmured criticisms of many present; until at length, Lady Lester, observing these things, went and whispered to him her advice that he should plead indisposition, and retire. And Sir Vincent, glad to escape, immediately followed her counsel.

Lady Lester, in watching the moodiness of Sir Vincent for the last few days, was in serious anxiety for his health and reason; and could find but one solution for the problem.

"He is in love with Miss Elmer. These dark-haired people are very uncertain, impulsive, and unreasonable, and difficult to be restrained by church or state; I am sure, of the two evils, I would rather the girl should encourage him a little than that he should be looking and acting so strangely, as to draw upon himself the animadversions of all our friends," she thought.

While Lady Lester was thus seeking and not finding out the true explanation of the baronet's uneasiness, her son Ruthven Lester, by patience and perseverance, in watching and availing himself of the first opportunity, had succeeded in detaching Lady Etheridge from all others, and leading her into the recess of a bay window, where, with the confidence of a young man, on admirable terms with himself, he declared his passion, and made a formal offer of his hand.

Lady Etheridge, inwardly amused at his self-conceit, thanked him for the honor he intended her; but begged leave to decline it. And when the young gentleman would have pressed his suit, she terminated the interview by rising and joining the company.

And soon after the Duchess of Beresleigh ordered her carriage, and they returned home.

* * * * *

An engagement to a breakfast given by the Hon. Mrs. Hobart, at her villa, near Fulham, occupied the forenoon of the next day, so that it was between four and five o'clock that Lady Etheridge, accompanied only by her maid, entered her carriage to set out for Windsor. The ride that afternoon was through one of the most beautiful suburbs of the town, and up over the green meadows and shady groves bordering the river. It was quite dark when the carriage reached Hounslow, and stopped to water the horses at the hotel.

"We wish to reach Windsor in good time to-night. Are the roads safe?" asked the coachman.

"Aye, aye, the roads be well enough; but there hasn't been a travelling-carriage passed the heath for the last week that hasn't been stopped by footpads. And a passil o' very suspicious-looking characters went by here a couple of hours ago. You'd a deal better stop where you are for the night," answered

the ostler, as he held a pail of water for the "nigh" horse to drink.

The latter part of this speech counteracted the former, for the coachman immediately came to the conclusion that there lurked an interested motive in this forewarning; so, instead of communicating it to Lady Etheridge, he replied—

"Oh! I think we will try to get on, at least as far as the 'Magpie,' where we can sleep if necessary." And gathering up his reins, he drove on.

They were soon out upon the open heath, where nothing could be more weird, dreary, and desolate than the aspect of heaven and earth. The sky was overclouded, dark, and lowering—not a single star was visible. The heath was bare, lone, and shadowy, from the murky centre to the obscured horizon. The only sound was that of the solitary carriage, as it rolled along the night road. Yet no sense of fear troubled the heart of Lady Etheridge; she had heard none of the rumors of outlying footpads, and was ignorant of the warning given by the people at Hounslow. She was lying back among the cushions in that dreamy, luxurious state, induced by being carried along with an easy, rapid motion through the darkness, when suddenly and silently the carriage was stopped and surrounded by dark, masked figures. Lady Etheridge, her heart paralyzed with extreme terror, sat transfixed and speechless, while her maid uttered scream upon scream. The same instant the coachman fired one shot from his double-barrelled pistol, and was about to fire another when he was mastered and disarmed.

"Yield quietly, and no harm shall befall you!" said one of the assailants, as they threw down and gagged and bound the struggling man.

The door of the carriage was then opened, and the inmates summoned to come forth.

Lady Etheridge, controlling her excessive terror, drew off her diamond ring, took off her watch and chain, drew out her purse, and offering them all to the men, besought them to set her coachman at liberty, and let her proceed upon her journey.

But the loud screams of the maid drowned at once her proffer and their reply.

"Stop the mouth of that screeching vixen, and let us hear what the lady says," commanded a leader among the assailants, and in another instant the poor screaming maid was seized, gagged, bound, and laid by the side of the helpless coachman, with the taunting words :

"Misery loves company, my lass."

Lady Etheridge was again summoned to come forth ; but controlling her agitation, she said :

"Listen to me ! Here is all the money and jewelry that I have about me ; take it all, free my servants, and let us pursue our journey."

"Yes, my lady ; certainly, your ladyship," said the leader, pocketing the offered valuables, and gently, but forcibly, lifting Lady Etheridge from the carriage.

Resistance on her part was perfectly vain ; expostulation was equally useless. Half fainting with terror, she was borne along and forced into another close carriage, where she sank among the cushions, utterly overcome by terror. The carriage started, and she felt herself borne swiftly onward through the darkness—whither, she dared not even guess—she felt herself in the power of unscrupulous ruffians, and she prayed for speedy death as for the least evil that could befall her. Intense terror takes no account of time. It seemed to her that she had been driven through the darkness for an eternity of anguish, when suddenly the gallop of horses was heard, a pistol was fired, torches blazed around the carriage, and a sonorous voice cried out :

"Stop, villains, on your lives !"

At the same moment the heads of the horses were seized, and the driver, as if struck with a panic, sprang from the box and fled.

"This is deliverance ! Oh, thank heaven !" cried Lady Etheridge, nearly swooning under the strong reaction of feeling.

The carriage door was then opened, and a tall, dark, military-looking man, holding a torch in his hand, appeared, and, bowing respectfully, hoped that the young lady was quite uninjured.

"Oh, quite, I thank you," replied Rose, still too strongly

agitated to require an explanation of this unexpected deliverance.

"The miscreants have fled, young lady—even the fellow that was upon the box; but if you will kindly tell us where you wish to be driven, I will gladly perform the duty of your coachman."

"We were on our way to Windsor when we were stopped," said Lady Etheridge.

"Windsor! you are entirely out of the road, madam. Windsor lies some fifteen miles off to the left, and the cross-roads are difficult and dangerous travelling by night."

"Then where is the Magpie Inn, which my unfortunate servants thought we could reach by supper time?"

"The Magpie Inn, madam, is on the London and Windsor road, full twenty miles from this spot."

"Then I have been taken very far out of my way," said Lady Etheridge, in perplexity.

"Some eighteen miles, I should judge, madam."

"Indeed I do not know what to do," exclaimed Rose, in perplexity. Then, as a bright thought flashed through her brain, she said, "Yes, late as it is, I will request you to drive me directly to the nearest justice of peace, if you know of one in the neighborhood."

"Certainly, madam, under all the circumstances, the wisest plan; it is the very advice I should have offered had I dared to counsel," said the stranger.

"You know of one, then?" gladly inquired Rose.

"Yes, my lady; there is Squire Howlet, of Howlet's Close, about a mile from this spot; he is a very zealous magistrate, and will not mind being knocked up in the night to receive such important information as of this daring violence."

"I am the more anxious to see a magistrate as soon as possible, that I may send assistance to my unfortunate servants," said Lady Etheridge.

"And—pardon me, where were they left, madam?"

"In a thick wood, about the middle of the heath, and half way between the Hounslow Hotel and the Magpie Inn, as nearly as I can judge."

"Not dangerously wounded, I hope, my lady?"

"No, quite unhurt, I believe, but bound and gagged, and desperately frightened; besides being exposed to the damp night air that may of itself be the death of the woman. The coachman, I hope, is more inured to exposure."

"We will drive immediately to the magistrate's, and send assistance. I will take the box."

"Will you first kindly inform me to whom I am so deeply indebted?" inquired the lady.

"My name, madam, is McCarthy—Colonel McCarthy, of the 11th Infantry. My companion, here, is Captain Roberts. I must entreat you to be so kind as to give him a seat in your carriage, as his testimony will be necessary before the magistrate. Roberts, come hither."

The person named had hitherto kept in the background, but now advanced to the side of the carriage.

It happened that the face of Lady Etheridge was partly averted when Roberts came up. And Roberts no sooner caught a sight of her face than he started and retreated precipitately.

"Excuse me one moment, madam," said the man who called himself McCarthy, bowing and hurrying after Roberts.

Lady Etheridge had seen nothing that passed in that moment in which her head was averted.

McCarthy hurried after Roberts.

"Roberts, what was the matter? you ran away as if from the face of a constable instead of that of a pretty woman. What was the meaning of it?"

Roberts was too much agitated to answer at once, but after struggling violently with some strong inward emotion, he asked:

"Who is this lady, whom we are engaged in deceiving?"

"Nay, her name is a profound secret; but this I can tell you, besides being, as you see, the most beautiful woman in London, she is a lady of rank and fortune."

"Never!" exclaimed Roberts, emphatically.

"But I assure you she is. Her high social position makes me, even me, tremble when I think of the violence that has been done her."

"Nonsense! Some pretty cottage-girl, protected by a duke and coveted by a prince, at best."

"Hish! Confound you, how dare you let your tongue run! She is a lady of high rank, I tell you!"

"Oh! a queen spelt with an 'a.'"

"Roberts, you provoke me! She is the Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne in her own right. There, now, confound you, if you ever breathe that, your tongue will have tied a knot around your neck."

"The Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne! Whe-ew!" exclaimed the man Roberts, sinking into thought.

"And now we must hurry back to the carriage. It is uncivil to leave the lady alone for a moment; but first tell me why you ran away from her."

"Presently, presently, dear Mac. You must permit me to ride beside you on the box, first, because it will not be civil to thrust me in upon the lady; and secondly, because I will not intrude upon her."

"Durst not face her, you mean."

"As you please, dear Mac. You always had a finer appreciation of nice shades of meaning than myself. At any rate, it would not only be uncivil, but it would be unwise, for either of us to intrude upon the lady. She would be wanting an explanation as to how we happened to come to her rescue, and neither you nor I have a story ready to tell."

"There is some truth in what you advance, so you may as well mount by my side. Well, here we are at the carriage," said McCarthy.

Roberts pulled his collar up and his hat down, to obscure his face, and keeping out of the range of view from the carriage windows, went round and mounted upon the box.

McCarthy went up to the carriage window, bowed, and said—

"Captain Roberts will not intrude upon your ladyship, ne will ride on the box beside me."

"I thank him very much," replied Lady Etheridge, very glad to be left alone.

McCarthy then mounted the box, and the carriage drove off. As they left the spot, Lady Etheridge caught a glimpse of two men leading away the horses that had brought these deliverers; and with a pang of undefinable dread, she thought

they had very much the air of the ruffians who had first attacked her carriage.

The carriage rolled rapidly on, and soon entered a deep wood. The sky had been overclouded all night, and now the rain began to fall. Lady Etheridge thought with anxiety of her servants, and longed to reach her journey's end that she might send relief to them. In the thickest part of this wood the carriage at length drew up before an old-fashioned, gloomy-looking country-house. McCarthy got down and knocked.

After a little delay, the door was opened by an old servant in a very suspicious state of readiness.

"Well, Jones, your master has been in bed hours, of course?"

"Yes, please your honor."

"And the housekeeper, of course?"

"Yes, please your honor."

"Well, show us into the most comfortable room at hand, and then see the horses put away, after which come to me," said McCarthy, and he helped Lady Etheridge to alight, and attended her into the house.

The old servant preceded them into the drawing-room, and retired to attend to the horses.

McCarthy seated Lady Etheridge upon a sofa, and inquired what refreshments she would be pleased to take. Rose declined any. Soon the old servant showed himself at the door and McCarthy went out to speak with him. After a few moments he returned to the drawing-room, and going to Lady Etheridge, said—

"Mr. Howlet is ill, and must not be disturbed to-night. In the morning, however, we can have an interview with him. In the meantime the housekeeper is getting up and will attend to all your comforts for the night."

"I feel very grateful; but, oh, my poor coachman and maid exposed to this rain storm!" exclaimed Rose, sorrowfully.

"Be comforted, madam; it is most probable that before this hour some passenger upon that frequented road has discovered and released them; indeed, I think it quite certain

to be so, because a rumor was rife along the road that a carriage had been waylaid and robbed, and a lady had been carried off. It was that rumor that led us to challenge the suspicious-looking vehicle in which we found your ladyship a captive. Now, how could such a rumor have got afloat so soon, if your servants had *not* been discovered and released?" inquired McCarthy, ingeniously.

"Oh! Heaven grant that they may be," said Lady Etheridge, fervently.

The appearance of the housekeeper now interrupted the conversation. She was a tall, stout, coarse, and florid woman, of fifty years of age, whose scarred face and over-dressed form did not add to the respectability of her office.

"I very much regret that your master is too ill to rise. I commend this lady to your care, and hope you will make her comfortable."

"I shall endeavor to do so. Madam, would you choose refreshments before retiring?" said Mrs. Thomas, addressing Lady Etheridge.

"No, I thank you, I need rest more than any thing else," replied her ladyship.

"Then I will show you at once to your room," said Mrs. Thomas, lighting a bed-room candle, and leading the way.

Lady Etheridge bowed to Colonel McCarthy, and followed the housekeeper from the drawing-room.

They passed up a flight of broad stairs, along several intricate passages, and finally entered a large, sombre chamber, with the windows and the heavy, four-post bedstead thickly curtained with dark damask.

The housekeeper sat the candle upon the mantelpiece, laid out a night-dress, and wishing the guest a pleasant night's repose, withdrew from the room.

But weary and exhausted as she was, Lady Etheridge was still too excited to think of sleep. She needed calmly to review all that had happened during the night in order to understand it. So, dressed as she was, she threw herself into an arm-chair simply to rest. Soon the disturbed household seemed to have sunk into perfect repose. The stillness of the hour was profound, and the silence and the strangeness

seemed to effect her with an undefinable apprehension. She remembered that she had not fastened the door of her chamber after the housekeeper, and she arose and locked it, and then returned to her chair. The candle burned low, and the shadows of the vast room grew deeper and darker. In her excited revery, her eyes were fixed absently upon the door of a closet, on the left of the fire-place. While gazing abstractedly upon this door, it seemed to move a little outward, and though she believed that her senses had deceived her, she shuddered with a vague fear, and kept her eyes fixed upon the door. It swung half open; she hoped the motion might have been caused by the wind, yet her heart stood still in doubt and terror—only for a moment, when the figure of a tall, stout man, wrapped in the voluminous folds of a black cloak, and having his face covered with a black mask, emerged from the closet, and advanced into the room.

Lady Etheridge shrieked, and started towards the door with the impulse of flying.

"Be not frightened; I will not harm you," said the intruder in a low whisper, as he glided to the door, and standing before it, intercepted her passage.

"I am betrayed!" grasped Lady Etheridge, in a dying voice, as she dropped, half-fainting, into her chair.

"You *are* betrayed; but not by me, who would save you," said the stranger, in the same low whisper.

"In the name of heaven, who are you?"

"A friend, who would rescue you from a danger worse than death."

"Why do you intrude upon my privacy at this hour?"

"To warn you as I must; to save you if I may!" said the stranger, in the same low, impressive whisper in which he had spoken from the first.

"I am in the house of a magistrate—I will summon assistance!" cried Rose, in terror, as she rushed from her chair.

"This chamber is provided with no bell-ropes; and it is, besides, far removed from the inhabited parts of the house. But do not be alarmed; I will advance no nearer to you than I am now. Listen to me: You said that you were in the

house of a magistrate. You are deceived. You are in a house which no honorable woman ever entered and departed from without leaving her honor behind."

"Oh, heaven of heavens! what shall I do? where can I turn? whom can I trust?" exclaimed Rose, in the extremity of distress.

"Trust *me*. We are nearer London than you have been led to suppose. I will conduct you safely from this house, and take you to that of your friend, the Duchess of Beresleigh."

"You know me then?"

"Yes, Lady Etheridge! yes, Rose Elmer!"

"And who are you?"

"One who, as I said before, is prepared to rescue you from a danger worse than death. I repeat that you are in a house whence no woman ever departed without leaving her honor behind, but from which I am willing to deliver you honorably. I can say no more."

"But, oh heaven, how shall I trust you?"

"Lady Etheridge, Rose Elmer, do you remember a scene, in which you acted a part, in the village church of Swinburne, on the first of July, some four years since?" said the stranger, in a low, significant tone.

"Ha! oh, heaven! who are you that tell me of that?" gasped Rose, turning pale as death.

"I am one who, by my perfect knowledge of all that transpired in that church, adjure you to arise and follow me."

"Man or demon, I will not! Although you may know the events of that fatal day to which you allude, death has cancelled that dreadful deed; I have nothing to regret or fear!"

"Ha! have you not?"

"No; nothing to fear but you! I do not believe the tale that you have been telling me. I shall not leave this house to trust myself with a stranger. I shall remain where I am, and use *this* if you advance one step towards me!" said Rose, drawing a penknife from her pocket, and opening the largest blade.

"Oh, then, if you will not be saved willingly, you must by

force. There is no more time to be lost in persuasion," said the intruder, and while he spoke he took off his cloak, and throwing it over her head quick as lightning, stifled her cries, muffled her form, and raising her in his powerful arms, bore her from the room, through the intricate passages, down the stairs, and to the great front door, which it seemed he had already unbarred and unlocked in readiness for his egress.

A cab stood in the deep shadow of the trees before the house. He forced his half-suffocated burthen into the vehicle, jumped in by her side, and immediately gave the order to drive on. They drove swiftly through the woods. When they had reached the heath beyond, the stranger threw the cloak a little back from the face of Rose, to give her air, at the same time saying—

"Scream now, if it will be any relief to you, my dear; scream as much as you please; nobody can hear!"

"Oh, villain! villain! heaven will send me deliverance," replied Rose, in whom violent indignation had conquered terror.

"My dear, you will believe in me, and thank me, when I set you down safely at Beresleigh House."

"Yes, when you *do*, miscreant! You only tell me this to calm my resistance: to make it easier and safer for you to carry me off. Shame on you, coward, to act with this violence towards a defenceless girl! But do not hope to escape detection and punishment. Since you know my name and rank, you know that I am not one to disappear without inquiry and search. We shall be pursued; you will be discovered, and punished with death, as you deserve!"

"You think so, my dear; but in another hour you will have a better opinion of me. I offer you no violence, except to withdraw you from a scene of danger—why can you not trust in me?" asked the stranger, in the cool manner, and with the low, smooth tone in which he had conducted the whole interview.

"Why can I not trust you, wretch?" exclaimed Rose, who found a sort of comfort and courage in the sound of her own voice, "because I have no earthly reason to trust, but every reason to *dis-trust*! Who are you? What motive can you,

an entire stranger, have for delivering me from 'a house of danger,' as you call the safe refuge whence you tore me? Why do you keep your form muffled, and your face masked, and why do you speak in a low whisper, and take every other precaution to conceal your identity, so as to make it impossible that I should ever recognize you again? Why do you do these things if you are an honest man, and your purposes are good?"

"Perhaps, because those from whom I save you have the power to injure me if they find me out. As to my motive for befriending you, that is my own secret; 'take the goods the gods provide,' without ungrateful questioning; but this one thing I will tell you, that there is enough of human selfishness in the motive to account for the act if you knew all."

"I will not trust you. I will appeal to the cabman. He may be an honest man. At any rate, he dare not help you to carry me off against my will," cried Rose, desperately.

"Do, my dear; appeal to the man," murmured the stranger, in smooth irony.

Rose beat loudly upon the front of the carriage, crying—

"Cabman! cabman. Stop! stop! I command you! You are committing a felony, for which you will be transported! You are helping a ruffian in a case of abduction!"

The cabman, at the first sound of the noise, stopped the carriage, and listened; but when he distinguished the words, he replied, in a soothing voice—

"Yes, mum; in course; just so, mum. Compose your narves, mum, do," and drove on.

And though Rose continued to beat upon the front of the carriage, and to call loudly, she could make no further impression upon the obtuse senses of the man, who continued stolidly silent and swiftly driving on.

"Scream and bang away, my dear. It relieves you, and does me no harm," observed her companion, in smooth irony.

Rose sank back exhausted, and burst into a passion of tears.

When she recovered from this storm of sobbing and weeping she looked out of the side window, and saw that day was

dawning. They were now rolling rapidly along the high road over the heath. The whole face of the country was lonely, with that depth of loneliness only to be seen just at the dawn of day. The latest passengers had passed away, the earliest had not come. The road before them stretched silent and solitary over the murky shadows of the heath. Suddenly, as she gazed hopelessly upon this scene—oh, sight of joy!—she perceived a post-chaise containing two persons just appearing at the top of the hill, and driving silently towards them. Her companion, sitting quietly, had not seen the approaching vehicle. Rose took her resolution, and acted upon it instantly. Dashing open the window nearest to her, she thrust her head out, and cried—

“Help! help! help! help, for the love of heaven!”

The stranger started up with a half-suppressed oath, seized and dragged her back, and muffling her head in his cloak, stifled her cries.

It was too late. Her voice had been heard. The other carriages rushed down upon them. The two vehicles met almost in a collision. Two men from the chaise jumped out and seized the heads of the horses. The cab stopped.

Seeing this, the man within dashed open the door on his side, sprang from the carriage, knocked down the post-boy who stood in his way, and struck straight across the heath, disappearing in a thicket a few hundred yards off.

Rose, left alone in the carriage, struggled to disembarass herself of the heavy folds of the cloak that had been thrown over her head. She had just succeeded in freeing herself when she heard some one approach the window, and a rich, manly voice say—

“You are perfectly safe now, dear madam. Compose yourself, and in a few moments we shall offer you the rest and refreshment you so much need.”

“The Duke of Beresleigh!” exclaimed Lady Etheridge in glad surprise, as she turned towards the window at which he stood.

“Yes, Lady Etheridge,” he replied, entering the cab.

“Oh, heaven be praised! What an escape I have had! But oh, what fortunate circumstance was it that sent you to my aid? It seems wonderful.”

"No; it is very natural, my dear Lady Etheridge. An attack like that made upon your carriage could not for an hour remain a secret. A few minutes after your coach had been stopped and robbed, and you had been carried off, and your servants left gagged and bound upon the highway, they were found by some countrymen returning home from a frolic. As soon as they were set at liberty, they related all the particulars of the robbery and abduction. They were taken to the Magpie. Information was given to the authorities, and the whole constabulary force of the neighborhood was raised for the apprehension of the ruffians. A man, mounted on a swift horse, brought the intelligence to Beresleigh about midnight. I ordered post-horses, and taking an officer with me, started at once for the Magpie Inn, which seemed to be the centre of the investigation. I need not say that I was on my way thither when I met the cab that was bearing you away. And now, Lady Etheridge, pray excuse me a few moments. The principal miscreant has fled, but I must see to the security of the cabman, who, if he is not an accomplice, will be useful as a witness."

Then, with a bow, the duke left the cab and beckoned the officer, who now approached, with the cabman in custody.

The prisoner looked excessively frightened, and, without waiting to be questioned, began his defence:

"Please, your lordship, I was not i' fau't. The gent as hengaged my cab tole me 'ow 'e 'ad a crazy 'oman to carry hoff to the mad-'ouse, and 'ow 'e wanted to take 'er away in the night, to save nexposing of 'er infirmities; and when 'e brought 'er and put 'er hinto the carriage I 'ad no suspicions; and when she growed wiolent I thought 'ow it was nateral, seeing she was mad, and I agreed to hall she said, and tried to soothe 'er down like—didn't I now, my lady?" he concluded, appealing lugubriously to Lady Etheridge.

"I think it very likely that he speaks the truth," said her ladyship.

"I trust that you will prove to have been a dupe rather than an accomplice. Did you know the person who engaged you in this nefarious business?" inquired the duke.

"Never set heyes on 'im before, your grace."

"Did not the fact of his being masked excite your suspicions as to the propriety of his actions?"

"No, your lordship's grace; because 'e said 'ow 'e wore the mask on account of the mad lady, 'o could not a bear the sight of 'im, though 'e was 'er brother, w'ich we know as mad folks hoffen take a misliking agin their friends."

"Was he masked when he came to you to engage the cab?"

"No, your grace's lordship—I beg pardon—I mean your lordship's grace, 'e 'adn't no mask hon when 'e hengaged me."

"What sort of a looking man was he, then?"

"A tall, stoutish, fair complected man, with light 'air and whiskers; a sweet-spoken gent, with most the beautifullest smile as hever I see; a gent as no one would think any hill on. 'E spoke as would ha' made the tears run down your lordship's grace's cheek hof 'is poor mad sister. 'Ow could I know 'e was a deceiving hof me, and a leading hof me hastray?"

Farther questioning on the part of the duke led to no further information, and his grace said:

"You will have to go with us, and be examined by a magistrate, who is now at the Magpie, collecting evidence. Resume your seat on the box, and drive as quickly as possible to the Magpie Inn."

The man bowed, and went to obey, when the officer respectfully touching his hat, said:

"I beg your grace's pardon, but I think I can identify the man of whom the cabman speaks as a desperate person, of whom the constables have long been in search."

"You think so, from such a very general description as that of 'a tall, stoutish, light-complected gent?' Why, there are ten thousand men in London to suit that description. It might be you for instance."

"Yes, your grace, that *general* description might suit, as you say, ten thousand men in town; but the particular description, 'a gent with very light 'air and whiskers, a sweet-spoken gent, with the most beautifullest smile as hever I see,' and the rest of it taken together, could suit only Roberts," said the officer, respectfully.

"And who is Roberts?"

"Your grace never heard of him by that name, but your

grace will know him better as——” the officer stooped and whispered a name, at which the cheek of the duke grew pale with horror.

“No, it cannot be! has *he* ventured back?”

“Yes, your grace, he has been seen.”

“What fatal, what frenzied infatuation! Surely Providence, to bring him to justice, has smitten him with a total blindness to consequences. And is it possible that there is a place, the most abandoned in London, that would shelter that monster?”

“Your grace, the man and his unnatural crime are well nigh forgotten, except by those concerned. And for the rest, his wonderful power of fascination subdues man, woman, and child.”

“Oh! one would think that the very land on which he stood would rise with a great painful heave and cast him off”

“Be sure, your grace, he cannot long elude justice; his fate has sent him to England.”

The Duke of Beresleigh seemed so painfully interested as almost to have forgotten that Lady Etheridge was half fainting from need of food and rest; but suddenly arousing himself, he re-entered the cab, and gave the order to drive on.

A half hour's rapid drive brought them to the Magpie, where a group of idlers, brought together by the news of the robbery and abduction, were collected.

The Duke of Beresleigh handed Lady Etheridge out and hurried her at once into the best parlor, where he placed her in charge of the landlady. The duke then repaired to another room where the magistrate was sitting, and where the cabman was already brought before him to give in his testimony. The man could only repeat what he had already told the duke, and so, when his words had been duly taken down in writing, he was set at liberty. The duke considerably paid him for his whole night's services, and the poor fellow, elated at his double escape from duration and loss, put up his horse and went into the tap-room to invest a portion of his funds in a pot of ale and a pound of beef, and to relate his wonderful adventures to a group of attentive countrymen. But no occasion had Jobson to spend his money. His curious and ad-

miring audience insisted upon "standing something," and entertained their story-teller with so much good-will that at the end of two hours, Jobson was fain to lie down and sleep off the combined effects of the ale and fatigue.

Meanwhile, Lady Etheridge having partaken of a slight repast and reposed herself upon a sofa for half an hour, arose and gave audience to the Duke of Beresleigh and the magistrate, who waited on her there, to receive her statement.

When she had circumstantially detailed all that had happened to her, the magistrate expressed his astonishment at events so much more complicated than had been suspected.

That the pretended deliverers were in league with the first assailants could not be doubted. But what the motive of the masked man could have been in carrying her off from the house in the wood could not be surmised.

The magistrate having collected all the evidence possible from all the parties, took leave and withdrew.

Post-horses were ordered, and Lady Etheridge, accompanied by the Duke of Beresleigh, and attended by her servant, returned to London.

They reached Beresleigh House at nightfall.

Lady Etheridge at once retired to bed to seek the uninterrupted rest she so much required. And the duke related to his mother all the particulars of the abduction and the rescue.

Feeling sure that Rose would require repose for many days, the duchess addressed a respectful letter to the queen, explaining the cause that inevitably delayed the honor Lady Etheridge desired of immediately waiting upon her majesty.



CHAPTER XXI.

SECOND LOVE.

A year ago, a year ago,
 I thought my heart so cold and still,
 That love it never more would know :
 That withering time, and sorrow's chill,
 Had frozen all its earlier glow.
 A year ago, a year ago,
 I said I ne'er should love again ;
 But then I had not seen thee — *Lord Strangford.*

LADY ETHERIDGE remained quietly at home for a few days, neither making nor receiving visits.

Since the night of the abduction and rescue, no further intelligence had been gained of the perpetrators of the violence.

The Duke of Beresleigh's manner to Lady Etheridge was now so full of reverential tenderness that her ladyship was not surprised, when, seated in her boudoir one morning, she was interrupted by the entrance of her maid, with the words :

"My lady, his grace the duke, sends his respects, and desires to know if your ladyship is disengaged and will receive him !"

"Certainly, show his grace in," replied Lady Etheridge, laying aside her book, and beginning to tremble with instinctive apprehension of the scene that was coming.

The duke entered. Lady Etheridge rose to receive him, pointed to a chair, and resumed her own seat.

"I hope I find you quite recovered from the effects of your late agitation?" said the duke, as he seated himself near her.

"Quite, I thank you. No effect remains but the pleasant one of a lively gratitude to my preserver," replied Rose, in a low voice.

"There was nothing to be grateful for. Would indeed that I could be as happy as to merit your—I dare not say gratitude, but—favor," he paused in that embarrassment that must always attend the avowal of a deep love.

"I feel that I have much, very much to be grateful for to all your grace's family, who were very kind to me while yet my prospects were very questionable. And as for the events of that fearful night, though they shook me so much, I would go through all that agony of terror again for the compensation it has brought me in the returning kindness of dear friends," said Rose, in a voice vibrating with her soul's deep emotion, and with her blue eyes full of tears.

Her words, her looks, her tones, betraying the profound love of her own pure heart, thrilled him to the very depths of his soul. He could have thrown himself at her feet and covered her hands with passionate kisses; and though he restrained himself, his whole frame shook, and his voice trembled with the curbed passion of his soul, as he took her hand, and said:

"Lady Etheridge, you grievously misunderstand me if you suppose that since those days of our first acquaintance at Beresleigh Court, my heart has changed except in loving you more and more deeply day by day. Rose, dear Rose! I was a poor man, with only a barren title and a debt-encumbered property to offer you. You were an inexperienced country-girl, scarcely conscious of your advantages as the heiress of one of the oldest baronies and largest fortunes in England. I knew that were you once introduced into society, your beauty, rank, and wealth would afford you the widest field of choice among the most distinguished suitors, who would be sure to lay their titles and their fortunes at your feet. You had no worldly father or managing mother to warn you of these things. Should I, then, take advantage of your isolation and inexperience to thrust myself between you and your most brilliant prospects? No, Rose, no; I saw you launched upon the sea of fashion, saw you courted by the most illustrious parties in the kingdom; and with a heart wasting for your love, I kept aloof, for, Rose, I loved you so truly that I was willing to sacrifice my own happiness for your welfare; and no man truly loves a woman who is not willing to do likewise if necessary." He paused from deep emotion, and Rose, with her eyes full of tears, faltered forth the words:

"Oh, it was very generous, very noble; but if you had had more simple faith in a woman's heart, you would have saved us both some months of misunderstanding and pain."

"Nay, sweet one, had I prematurely thrust myself upon your favor, I should have reproached myself for such egotistical precipitancy, and perhaps been haunted by the thought that I had intervened between you and a more brilliant destiny. But now that I have observed you through the season, and seen you discourage the advances of those whom the dowagers call 'the most desirable parties in town,' now, Rose, I venture, with a free conscience, to lay my poor strawberry leaves at your feet."

For all answer, Rose silently placed her hand in his. He pressed that fair little hand to his lips, saying :

"And now, dear Rose, I will seek my mother and make her happy by sending her to embrace her daughter-in-law."

"No, not yet," murmured Rose, in a faint voice.

"Not yet, my love; what means my Rose?"

"I have shown you my heart, you know that it is all your own, and since that knowledge makes you happier, I do not regret that you possess it, but—"

She paused in the most painful embarrassment.

"But what, sweet Rose?"

"You do not know upon what an obscure brow it is that you offer to place the ducal coronet of Beresleigh."

"I do not understand you, dear Rose."

"Oh," she broke forth vehemently, "I would the play were over."

Her lover looked at her with a painful perplexity. She went on :

"The world calls me Lady Etheridge of Swinburne, but I am no more Baroness Etheridge than I am the Empress Catharine of Russia."

"My dear Rose."

"I am not; I feel that I am not."

"But the House of Lords——"

"Has made a mistake; not the first time the highest tribunal in the realm has done so."

"Lady Etheridge, the chain of evidence that established your rights was complete even to the satisfaction of the most conservative of those old peers. What reason have you then, to think that a mistake has been made?"

"No external reason perhaps, but a deep-seated internal conviction that all this delusive glory of mine is a mere passing pageant. I am but a poor little robin in the plumage of a glorious *parroquette*, or a poor deer in the skin of a lioness; or a little player baroness who must sustain her part as well as she can until the play is done, and then sink into her real insignificance. But oh, what a heavy payment fate may exact for this masquerade with which she is amusing me. I can fancy how the world that offers me nothing but adulation now, will then follow my vanishing form with laughter and scorning. Some, I know, would pity the poor girl who had been made so great a fool of by fortune."

"Oh, Rose, could it be as your morbid imagination forbodes, could you be deprived of all the advantageous attributes of rank and wealth, believe it, to me you would ever be the same—ever the dearest treasure of my life," said the duke, earnestly.

"It will be as I said. I shall be plucked of all my borrowed plumage; stripped of all my false splendor; I shall be again the poor little Rose of former days, only a little wiser and sadder for my experience of these. I deem it necessary to tell you of this strong conviction of mine with all the emphasis of swearing to a fact, so that you may know for a certainty that you are offering your ducal coronet not to the Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne, but to a poor cottage-girl who is forced to play that part for a season, and plays it ill enough, no doubt."

"And even if this were so, nay, grant for a moment that it is so, that you are the humble village-maiden that you seemed a year ago, I tell you that I love and honor you beyond all other creatures, I entreat you to be my wife, and assure you that your acceptance of my suit will make me the happiest, as your rejection of it would leave me the most miserable among men. Now dearest, give me your hand in token that you are mine."

"Not yet!"

"Not yet! What now, dearest Rose?"

"There are other things yet that you must hear before committing yourself."

"What can they be? Speak, dear Rose, for I do not understand to what you allude, and I am certain only of one thing, that nothing you have to tell shall separate us. You are mine only, and forever."

"Listen first. Supposing me to be that humble cottage-girl that I was a year ago, and that I may be again a year hence; and granting that, as such, you thought me not unworthy to share your rank, still you would like to think that you had won the first love of my heart, for every man delights in believing that he possesses the first, as well as the only love, of the maiden whom he seeks to make his wife. Is it not so?"

"Rose, in the name of Heaven, what mean you?"

"That you, George, Duke of Beresleigh, had not the first love of the poor girl whom you ask to become your wife."

"Rose! Good Heaven, what is this you are about to tell me?"

"That poor Rose's heart was lost and won long before she knew the Duke of Beresleigh."

"Oh, girl, girl! how cruelly you have trifled with my happiness and your own peace! You love another!" exclaimed the duke, starting to his feet in great agitation.

"No, no, you mistake me—widely mistake me. I do not love another; that great delusion is long since quite over," said Rose, blushing at her own vehemence.

"Explain, explain, in the name of Heaven, explain!" cried her lover, hastily returning to his seat.

"Listen, then, and oh, listen patiently. Your agitation frightens and unnerves me," faltered Rose.

"Forgive me, dearest; I will be calm," replied her lover, controlling himself by an effort.

"Two years ago, when I was a poor village-girl, living with my reputed mother, there came a stranger to our village. He was handsome, accomplished, and very fascinating. Under the name of William Lovel, he sought and made my ac-

quaintance. I was a romantic dreamer, longing for a higher, freer, and more beautiful life than our sordid circumstances permitted. William Lovel appeared to me to be the embodiment of perfect beauty, wisdom, and goodness—the being destined to lead me up to that higher life to which I aspired.”

“Oh, heaven and earth, the old story—it is the old story,” groaned the duke.

“He lent me books, he gave me instruction, he cultivated my taste in art and literature, he sought and won my love—nay, do not start and frown—he won my love—no more.”

“Go on, go on.”

“You know the story of the ex-Baroness Etheridge, and know how I, unworthy that I was, arose upon that noble lady’s fall.”

“Yes, yes, dearest, I know the particulars of that event; proceed, proceed.”

“It was while this noble lady was still called the Baroness Etheridge, and upon the day preceding that fixed for her wedding with Mr. Albert Hastings, that William Lovel came down to our village. He sought an interview with me, and persuaded me, weak girl that I was, to consent to a private marriage.”

“And you consented? Unhappy girl!”

“Yes, I consented—weakly and wickedly consented—to marry him clandestinely that same evening.”

“Unfortunate child. Oh, Rose! Rose!”

“Bear with me. I consented, but I was providentially saved from the consummation of that folly, and, at the same time, forever cured of my dangerous infatuation.”

“Thank Heaven for that. Go on—go on.”

“That same afternoon upon which I promised to meet him at a later hour to be married, I was sent by my poor foster-mother with her last message to Lady Etheridge, at Swinburne Castle. I was shown up into the library where the lady sat, with the title-deeds of the Swinburne estates before her, waiting for the arrival of her betrothed husband, Albert Hastings, that she might put them in his hands, and endow him with the whole property. While I was still with the lady, the expected visitor entered, and in Albert Hastings,

the betrothed husband of Lady Etheridge, I recognized William Lovel, my lover."

"Good heaven!"

"I was saved! My misplaced love died hard, but it *did* die. The man who could at the same time deceive the noble lady who endowed him with her princely fortune, and the humble maiden who gave him her whole heart—the man who could deliberately plan the destruction of that confiding maiden upon the very eve of his marriage with that high-souled lady, was unworthy of regret, unworthy of resentment, unworthy of every thing except total oblivion," said Rose, with a beautiful and majestic expression.

"Give me your dear hand! Rose, you are an angel."

Rose shook her head with a sad smile, and said:

"There never was a woman with more antecedents to acknowledge than I. There is yet another event that I must make known to you—an event connected with my earlier youth."

"What! another secret, dear Rose! a third secret?"

"A third secret!"

"I will not hear it! Only assure me that your hand and heart are now perfectly free, and that you are willing to bestow them upon my unworthy self, and I shall be happy."

"My hand and heart are free, and they are yours if you want them; yet you should know this third secret of my life."

"I will not hear it! Dear Rose, you are mine as I am yours! Is it not so?"

For all answer she placed her hand in his.

He pressed that small fair hand fervently to his lips.

"And yet I would that you would hear what I have yet to tell you," she said very earnestly.

"No more, dear girl, no more! Thus to put you into the confessional were unmanly and ungenerous. What you have already told me is enough to prove the candor and purity of your heart. Say only that you are mine! Say it, dear Rose."

"I am yours."

* * * * *

The same day the Duchess of Beresleigh was informed of

the engagement, and a few days after, the betrothal of the Duke of Beresleigh to the Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne was announced to the world.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE INTRIGUER FOILED.

When lovely Hope, with seraph power,
Has filled the cup of bliss,
Too oft in unexpected hour,
We all its pleasures miss.
For when the glittering cup we win,
And fondly think we've pleasure found,
Fell disappointment rushes in,
To dash it to the ground.

THE announcement of the betrothal of the Duke of Beresleigh and the Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne surprised no one, for, as usual, the world knew all about the affair long before the parties most concerned knew any thing of it.

Only Colonel Hastings was astonished, and Mr. Albert Hastings shocked.

"I thought she would have preferred to exercise her power a little longer before surrendering her liberty," said Colonel Hastings, musingly.

"I hoped she would not soon forget. I always loved that girl, and I believe that she loved me. I did not think that any woman's love could have expired so soon," said Mr. Hastings, indignantly.

"Ah, my dear fellow, her passion did not go into a gentle decline in the natural way of such transitory feelings, it was put to a violent death!" said the Colonel, with a shrug.

"Yes; by the shock she received in recognizing me at the castle. Well, it is all over now," sighed Albert Hastings.

"Pho! if there is one thing in this world more tiresome than another, it is to be obliged to repeat the same things over and over again to people upon whom you can make no

sort of impression. Have I not told you that if, instead of the Duke of Beresleigh, it were a royal duke to whom she was contracted, I would, with a word, break the marriage off?"

Albert Hastings looked at his worthy father in incredulous astonishment.

"Yes—you doubt me; but wait a few days, and see if you do not have the breaking off of this intended marriage as publicly announced as its contraction was. I shall call upon Lady Etheridge to-day."

This conversation took place in the breakfast-parlor at Hastings House, as the father and son sat over their coffee and muffins.

Colonel Hastings was as good as his word, and in the course of the same day presented himself at Beresleigh House, and sent in his card, with a request to see Lady Etheridge.

He received the answer that Lady Etheridge was engaged, and could not have the honor of seeing Colonel Hastings.

This was just what he had expected; so he went into a neighboring reading-room, whence he addressed a note to Lady Etheridge, to the effect that he wished to see her upon matters of the utmost importance, concerning herself mostly.

To this note he received an answer that any matters which Colonel Hastings had to communicate to Lady Etheridge must be addressed to her ladyship's solicitor.

Colonel Hastings was baffled for the time. He permitted a day to pass, and then addressed the following note to Lady Etheridge:

"HASTINGS HOUSE, *Sept. 12th*, 18—.

"MADAM:—That which I have to communicate to your ladyship is a matter which you may not like to have confided even to your own solicitor, and which can be communicated to your ladyship alone. Abiding your ladyship's orders to wait upon you, I have the honor to be, madam, your obedient servant,

WILLIAM HENRY HASTINGS."

Rose took this note immediately to the duchess, who read it and laughed, saying—

"You are no daughter of Eve if you do not see the old gentleman, and find out what he means. See him, my love, see him; I confess to some curiosity"

Rose accordingly wrote a note to Colonel Hastings, requesting him to call the succeeding day at twelve o'clock.

Punctually at noon the next day the colonel presented himself. He was shown at once into the library. Rose soon entered. This was the first occasion upon which Rose had ever met the father of her former lover. She advanced with cold dignity, saying—

“Colonel Hastings, I presume?”

“The same, madam. I have the honor of addressing Lady Etheridge?”

“Yes, sir. Will you be seated?”

“I thank you, madam,” said the colonel, handing a chair to Lady Etheridge, and taking one for himself.

They sat down at opposite sides of the reading-table.

“You demanded an interview with me, sir; may I be informed for what purpose?” inquired Rose, coldly.

“I requested an interview with you, madam, in order to communicate a fact which came to my knowledge through my very intimate and confidential relations with the late baron, and which vitally concerns your present position and prospects.”

“My—which concerns my present position and prospects! I do not understand you, sir.”

“Your present position as Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne; your prospects as the affianced wife of the Duke of Beresleigh.”

“I am very sure that nothing which Colonel Hastings can have to communicate can in any way affect the one or the other,” replied Rose, in so haughty a tone that the old gentleman lost some measure of his temper and self-control, as he said—

“We shall see that, madam. Your ladyship has heard of me, perhaps, as the life-long, intimate friend of the late baron?”

Rose bowed, haughtily.

“You are also aware that I was left the guardian of the person and property of the young lady who was brought up as his heiress?”

Again Rose bowed in cold silence.

"You have also heard, perhaps, that upon the last day and night of the late baron's life, when he refused to see either physician or clergyman, he summoned me to his bedside, where I remained until he died?"

"I have heard so," said Rose, very coldly.

"Then, madam, since you know that I possessed the perfect confidence of the late baron up to the very instant of his death, I should think that the respect which you refuse to my age and my gray hairs, might at least be accorded to the last confidential friend of him whom you believe to have been your father," said the colonel, with some asperity.

"I trust that I fail in respect to none; but this seems wide of the purpose which brought you hither. Will you please to explain it?"

"Yes. On that last day and night of his life, the late Baron Etheridge of Swinburne confided to me a secret," said Colonel Hastings, pausing.

"Well, sir?"

"A secret that concerns yourself," continued the colonel, marking the effect that his words might produce upon his hearer.

"Well, sir, perhaps it was never intended for my ears, in which case you had better not divulge it."

"But it *was* intended for your ears, as well as for the ears of all the world."

"Then, sir, it seems to me that it should long since have been made known."

"The time had not come. The time has only now come."

"Well, sir?"

"The secret confided to me by the late baron was a fact, for the proof of which he furnished me with abundant evidence in the form of legal documents."

"Well, sir, I do not yet see how the secret, the fact, confided to you by the late baron on his death-bed, affects his daughter at this late day."

"Then I will straightway tell you. That secret, that fact, of which I am the only custodian, of which I only possess the proofs, would, if proclaimed, cast you down from your present high position to your former penury and obscurity," said the

colonel, slowly, watching the face of Rose to see the effect which his words produced.

She turned a shade paler, but made no comment.

"You now know whether this secret concerns you or not," said the colonel, sarcastically.

"Pray go on, sir; play the play out," replied Rose.

"That secret, that fact, with all its proofs, which, once divulged, would cast you down from wealth and rank to poverty and obscurity, is mine alone! and whether it shall ever be divulged rests with me and you alone! I only have the power of dashing the coronet of Swinburne from your brow; you only have the choice of bidding me close my lips forever or open them upon this subject."

"Pray proceed, sir; tell me what is in your power to divulge, and the terms of your silence," said Rose, sarcastically.

"I will. The secret confided in me on his death-bed, by the late Baron Etheridge, of Swinburne, together with the proofs for establishing the fact, was the existence of another, the only true heir of the barony of Swinburne, before whose claims all others must shrivel up as stubble before the flame," said the colonel, solemnly.

"I am not surprised. It is just what my heart prophesied," thought Rose, within herself.

"You believe what I state, Lady Etheridge?"

"Yes, I believe it; I thoroughly believe it. Now, then, tell me the name of this rightful heir," said Rose, earnestly.

"Nay, Lady Etheridge; the *name* of that heir is a secret that I dare not confide, even to yourself, as yet."

"Very well; then tell me the terms upon which you will forever close your lips upon the subject of this supposed heir," said Rose, with a sarcasm so fine as to escape the apprehension of the obtuse intellect of Colonel Hastings.

"Listen, then, Lady Etheridge—for Lady Etheridge you may remain to the end of your life, if you list. More than twelve months since, you were acquainted with my son, Mr. Albert Hastings——"

"Nay, I never knew Mr. Albert Hastings," replied Rose, haughtily.

"Very well, then; let that pass. More than a year ago you knew a person calling himself William Lovel."

"A traitor, who had no right to the name that he assumed."

"*Very* well! now we begin to understand each other! Now we are coming to the point. You acknowledge an acquaintance with William Lovel."

"A *former* acquaintance, since repudiated," said Rose, severely.

"Exactly. You acknowledge a former acquaintance, since repudiated, with a man calling himself William Lovel; is it not so?"

"Yes."

"*Extremely* well. To proceed. My son, Mr. Albert Hastings, while yet in his early youth, and quite unacquainted with his own heart, from the praiseworthy motive of pleasing his old father, contracts himself to the supposed Baroness Etheridge, for whom he cares little or nothing. In one of his frequent visits to the neighborhood of his betrothed, he sees a lovely cottage-girl, with whom he becomes sincerely enamored. Our affections are not under our own control, else, knowing the exquisite delight there is in living with those we love, we should love only those we live with. Enough! He was bound to the Lady Etheridge of Swinburne; but he loved only the cottage girl. With the ardor and desperation of a youth in love, he felt that he must win *her* love, or die. He dared not woo her under his true name of Albert Hastings, for that was known to be the name of the betrothed husband of the *then* Lady Etheridge of Swinburne. 'All stratagem is fair in love and war,' says an old proverb. Young men will be young men. You cannot make them saints or angels, especially if they are in love with a woman whom they should not think of. By this time you must know the world, Lady Etheridge, and be able to forgive that which, a year ago, you could not even comprehend. It was because Albert Hastings loved you desperately, that he forgot his own honor and your safety, and under the name of William Lovel, sought your acquaintance, and wooed and *won* your affections. You are no true woman if you cannot forgive that *ruse* of a young man's frantic passion," said Colonel Hastings, narrowly watching upon the face of Rose the effect of his words.

"I had not only forgiven, but forgotten all this, long ago. The only meed which the principles and practice which Mr. Albert Hastings, *alias* Mr. William Lovel, had won from me, was simple oblivion. Only that you recalled him to my memory, I had never thought of him or his duplicity again," said Rose, very quietly.

"You are severe; yet Albert Hastings loves you still, loves you only, has loved you ever!" said Colonel Hastings, earnestly.

"You are wandering from the point, sir. Mr. Albert Hastings' sentiments can be of no importance whatever to me. That which I would learn from you is this—what are the terms upon which you propose to suppress the existence of the true heir of Swinburne?" inquired Rose, coldly.

"I will suppress the existence of the real heir of Swinburne, and leave you in possession of your fictitious rank and wealth, upon the conditions that you will at once break off your impending marriage with the Duke of Beresleigh, and contract your hand to your first lover, my son, Mr. Albert Hastings," said the old gentleman, firmly.

"And if I do not?" inquired Rose.

"If you do not, I shall wait upon his grace, the Duke of Beresleigh, and first of all, put him in possession of the particulars of your acquaintance with Mr. Albert Hastings."

"He knows that already, from my own lips."

"Very well; then I shall advise him of the existence of the true heir of Swinburne, with all the proofs necessary to establish his claim, and oust the present possessor from her false position," said the colonel, grimly.

"And what do you suppose will be the effect of that communication?" inquired Rose, with a scarcely suppressed sneer.

"When I shall have proved to the Duke of Beresleigh the existence of an heir to the barony and castle of Swinburne, who shall turn out the present possessor from her false position, his grace will be the first to break off the contemplated marriage."

"You think, then, that the Duke of Beresleigh would act by me just as Albert Hastings did by the former Lady Etheridge?"

“Precisely : it is human nature. So, think, Lady Etheridge, whether it were not better that you should accept my terms, break off the engagement with the duke, retain the barony, and marry Albert Hastings, then reject my conditions, lose your position, be forsaken by your intended husband, and sink into your former obscurity.”

“No,” exclaimed Rose, with impassioned emphasis, “no ; better any suffering than the sin of keeping the rightful heir out of the estate. Better any fate than the folly of joining my life with that of a doubly-dyed traitor as Albert Hastings has proved himself to be ; and now, sir, that you have ventured to exhibit to me the whole of your base policy, you shall hear mine, yes, without measure. You appealed to my reverence, sir, upon account of your age and the gray hairs that symbolize it, and of your confidential relations with the late Baron Etheridge. Sir, I reply to this, that age without honesty, and gray hairs without honor, are unworthy of respect, and that the confidence reposed in you by the late baron has been, by your own showing, greatly abused. He confided to you the name of his rightful heir, and the task of reinstating him in his rank and position. You abuse the trust by concealing the existence of the true heir, so that you may marry the presumptive heiress to your son, and endow him with the lands and lordships of Swinburne. While Laura Elmer held the rank of Baroness Etheridge, you would have married her to your son, but when she fell from her high place, through no fault of hers, and I rose upon her fall, through no merit of mine, you and your son forsook her, and now you dare to bring your suit to me, and to threaten me, if I reject it, to produce the real heir, cast me down from my position, and break off my marriage with the Duke of Beresleigh. To all of this I have one practical reply to make. I will immediately request the presence of the Duke of Beresleigh here, and you shall repeat in his presence all that you have related to me,” said Rose, pulling the bell-rope.

“Lady Etheridge, you are excited ; calm yourself, pause, reflect,” exclaimed Colonel Hastings, anxiously.

The door opened, and a footman appeared.

“Take my compliments to the Duke of Beresleigh, and say that I request his grace to join us here.”

"Lady Etheridge, you are mad! Countermand your order before it is too late," exclaimed the Colonel, in an excited whisper.

But the servant had already bowed and withdrawn from the room, while the face of Lady Etheridge betrayed no signs of relenting.

"Nay, then, if you will be so frantic, I shall withdraw; yet I beseech you be careful; take time to reflect; do not commit yourself rashly; take time to weigh consequences, and, if you should come to a different decision, a note directed to my town-house will always find me. Be cautious not to betray your own interests, and I, on my part, shall be careful to guard this secret for yet a few days longer."

Footsteps were now heard approaching, and the Colonel, bowing deeply, hastily withdrew.

He had scarcely made his escape when the Duke of Beresleigh entered.

Rose was walking excitedly up and down the floor.

The duke entered, looking around, and saying—

"I thought to have found Colonel Hastings here."

"No, he has run away. He came hither to intimidate a woman, not to face a man," said Rose, excitedly.

The duke stood still and looked at her in amazement for a moment, and then, leading her to a seat, said—

"Sit down and compose yourself, dearest Rose, and tell me calmly what has occurred."

"First, it is as my heart prophesied, dear George, and I am not the heiress of Swinburne."

"Forgive the question, dearest Rose, and tell me what reason, beyond your own fancy, you have for saying so."

"The old man who had just left me has said so. He declares that when he attended my late father in his last hours, the baron confided to him the secret of the existence of an heir to the barony and castle of Swinburne, together with every proof necessary to establish his rights. Colonel Hastings offered to suppress these facts and destroy the proofs if I would marry his son, and threatened to produce the heir and establish his rights by the proofs in his possession, if I refused."

"And you, dearest, you replied to him as he deserved?"

"I requested him to say to your grace all that he had said to me, and I rang and sent a message requesting you to join us, whereupon Colonel Hastings hurried away."

"And what do you think of this strange communication, love?" inquired the duke, smiling.

"It confirms the prophetic feelings of my heart; I feel that it must be true," replied Rose, gravely.

"And I believe it to be essentially false! This man has probably heard of your morbid forebodings upon the subject of your inheritance, which is no secret to your friends, and he has sought to practice upon your credulity for his own purposes. That is all."

"But I credit this story, though I cannot trust him. And, believing the story as I do, pray tell me what must I do?"

"Nothing, simply nothing."

"Is there no way of compelling him to produce the heir and the proofs of which he speaks?"

"No way in the world that I know, unless you know the name of that heir."

"Can he not be compelled to divulge the name?"

"No, he cannot be compelled to give the name, or to produce the heir or the proofs, even if such an heir and such proofs exist, which, I repeat, I do not believe. Your present policy is that which a great statesman has termed 'masterly inactivity.' If such an heir exists, let Colonel Hastings bring him forward and prove his claims to the barony of Swinburne, when you will at once yield up your possessions. I need not repeat to you that no change in your fortunes can work any change in my feelings or purposes towards you. You are, under all circumstances and vicissitudes, my promised wife, the future Duchess of Beresleigh."

With a beaming smile Rose placed her hand in his, and they went forth together to join the duchess at dinner, who was curious to know the nature of Colonel Hastings' communication to Lady Etheridge. When made acquainted with the subject-matter of the conversation, her grace smiled sarcastically at what she also considered only as the empty threat of a weak and designing old man.

And in the course of the same day, the fourteenth of the ensuing month was fixed for the marriage.

The evening of the same day upon which these events took place, the mysterious individual, whom we have heard called by the name of Roberts, walked restlessly up and down the floor of his gloomy apartment in the old, ruined palace of Ely. His restlessness was without the least ill-humor; nay, he smiled to himself, as he murmured:

"Gentlemen who can walk abroad at large at all hours of the day can, of course, have little appreciation of the tediousness of waiting twelve or fourteen hours in a place like this, or they would exhibit more charity."

His good-humor was at last rewarded by the sound of steps approaching the door, and by the peculiar rap by which the visitor announced his arrival.

Roberts cautiously opened the door, admitted the visitor, and secured it behind him before speaking.

"Well, dear Mac, here you are at last, old fellow! I have been hoping and expecting to see you ever since the night of our adventure. I could not find any safe way of communicating with you until this afternoon, when I contrived to send you a note. But *you* knew where to find me, and it was cruel in you not to come," said Roberts, in his usual gay, sweet tone.

"It was wise and prudent of me. Was I, perchance, to show the police the way to your lair? Roberts, you are the most imprudent man I ever knew for a coward."

"Epicure, epicure, dear Mac; not coward, but epicure; it is not danger or death that I dislike, but pain, dear Mac, pain; therefore, call me epicure, or voluptuary, if you like, but not coward," said Roberts, mildly.

"Very well, then; for an *epicure* you run more risks of hurting yourself than any one I ever knew."

"Nay, I am very cautious; I have not shown myself abroad by daylight since the adventure. But now tell me, what does the world outside say of it?"

"They give opinions as opposite as north and south. Of this, however, I can assure you, suspicion is far off the right track. Neither you nor I am suspected, so far as I have been able to discover. The particulars given by the young lady to the magistrates are of the general and unsatisfactory

character. Her carriage attacked in the night on Hounslow Heath by thieves, not one of whom she could identify; herself rescued by two gentlemen, who called themselves Colonel M'Carthy and Captain Roberts, but whose faces she never distinctly saw, and taken through the darkness to a country house in the woods, somewhere off the road between Windsor and London, and finally carried off again thence by a man who wore a mask and spoke in whispers. Very interesting but very embarrassing all that! There may be two hundred unidentified foot-pads in England. There are, perhaps, two thousand gents who might answer to the description of Colonel M'Carthy and Captain Roberts, of the 11th Infantry, though there happen to be no such officers in that gallant regiment. And lastly, as the preachers say, there are at least two score of old country-houses in the woods off the road between London and Windsor, though there may be no such place as Howlet's Close found among the number. But there is one thing I cannot understand, Roberts."

'What is that?'

"Who the deuce it could have been that carried the young lady from the house in the woods, and so ruined my enterprise!"

"What?" inquired Roberts, abstractedly.

"I say, I cannot imagine who that man in the mask, who concealed himself in the young lady's room, and seized and carried her off by force, could have been, or what his motive could have been. I have been thinking of it ever since, and can make nothing of the matter—can you?"

"No, indeed, dear Mac; I never was intended by nature as a detective."

"In fact, I am more puzzled than the police; for the police are not puzzled at all. They who have not been able to identify either the first assailants, the rescuers, or the country-house to which the young lady was taken, have quite hit upon the individual who carried her off thence," said Mac, looking wistfully at his companion, whose only comment was a smooth, serene—

"Indeed."

"Yes; they have quite made out the identity of the indi

vidual who carried Lady Etheridge off from the house in the woods! Now, who do you suppose they have made him out to be?"

"Upon my life I could not say, dear Mac," answered Roberts, with cheerful frankness.

"*You!*"

"Me?" inquired Roberts, with gay incredulity.

"*You!*"

"What nonsense, dear Mac! What should have put that into their remarkably stupid heads?" inquired Roberts, with an amused expression of countenance.

"The evidence of the cabman who was hired by the man to carry off the lady, and who described his employer as 'a tall, stoutish, light-complected gent, with light 'air and w'iskers, and most the beautifullest smile as hever I see!'"

"Ha, ha, ha! A description that would suit half a million of British gentlemen!" laughed Roberts, gayly.

"Exactly—precisely. Yet, you see, they could think of no one but yourself. It shows that they know you to be in England, and that they are in search of you. So, though of course they are ludicrously mistaken in supposing you to have been the masked man that carried off the beauty from the house in the woods, yet, as their attention is turned towards you, you had better leave England as soon as you can get off. In fact, I cannot imagine what madness it was that brought you back."

"The madness is comprised in one word—Helen."

"You, 'for another Helen, would lose another Troy.'"

"No more of that—to come to the point. Though our enterprise has signally failed, yet I dare to presume the—hem!—nobleman, your patron, has liberally, or will liberally reward our zeal."

"Hush, for Heaven's sake. No. Had we succeeded in securing the beauty, and had she been persuaded to listen to his suit, I will not venture to say what we might not have expected from the gratitude and munificence of my noble patron, for with—hem!—nobles, success is the test of merit. But we failed, and failure is, with the same judges, the proof of demerit. And were we to acknowledge our deed, and

claim reward for our zeal, we should be transported for our crime."

"Humph! it is a nice business this secret service of — nobles," said Roberts, with a good-humored smile.

"It was a failure, Roberts—a failure, and, as such, must be borne with philosophical coolness."

"And is the case quite hopeless with the young lady?"

"So hopeless that she will be married on the fourteenth of next month to his Grace the Duke of Beresleigh."

"No!" exclaimed Roberts, betrayed into more energy of expression than was usual with him.

"Yes, certainly, it is publicly announced; but what is there so strange about that as to make you start up and exclaim in that way?"

"Rose Elmer—Lady Etheridge—Duchess of Beresleigh," murmured Roberts, musing deeply.

"Well, well, well, of course! All natural enough, the pair were understood to be engaged long before their betrothal was announced; but why it should affect *you* so strangely I cannot imagine," exclaimed Mac, in impatient surprise.

"Why, my dear Mac? Because such a marriage will disappoint your—*noble*—patron," replied Roberts, smoothly, having quite recovered his serenity.

"Pooh; *that* is not the reason. What do you take me for to impose such a story as that upon me?"

"Really, my dear Mac, that is one reason, though not the only one. The other is that I once knew this Rose Elmer as the daughter of a village laundress. And you will acknowledge that I have a right to be rather startled to hear that she is about to become a duchess."

"Hem! I doubt much whether that is the whole reason, either; but I will not press upon so very forbearing an antagonist. I will rather draw our conversation to a close. You sent for me, merely to know whether my noble patron would repay your unsuccessful efforts to serve him."

"I did, dear Mac."

"And I told you 'no,' for if the ill-fated enterprise should come to his knowledge, our patron, instead of rewarding our zeal, would punish our crimes and illustrate his own high sense of justice."

"Exactly, dear Mac; but what is the use of repeating painful truths?" said Roberts, sweetly.

"In order to come to a pleasant one, and to tell you that, although nothing is to be expected or hoped for from our patron, yet I will not permit you to suffer loss from an enterprise into which I was the means of drawing you. I came here with the express purpose of telling you all this, putting this fifty-pound note into your hand, and advising you to place as many miles of sea between yourself and England as you conveniently can, for your own good, and my safety, for you are just the fellow to turn king's evidence upon a pinch," added Mac, mentally.

"I thank you, dear Mac. You are very kind and thoughtful. I accept your bounty as a loan, to be repaid with interest some of these days."

"Of course, as a loan," replied Mac, very drily, adding—"and now I must really wish you good-evening, or rather bid you good-bye. I hope to hear from you from Quebec or Constantinople," said Mac, shaking hands with Roberts, and leaving the room.

Left alone, Roberts took two or three turns up and down the room, murmuring—

"Rose Elmer—Baroness Etheridge—Duchess Beresleigh! high fortunes for the cottage-girl! I could spoil that pretty sport if I chose to do so, or dared to show myself! Were but one man and one woman out of my way, what a prospect were opening to me! I must think! I must think! Here is a magnificent fortune, and perhaps a baron's coronet, within my very grasp, but that man who was the witness of my crime! and that woman, who is the living obstacle to my ambition! The woman may be easily enough disposed of, poor creature! but the man! the man! I must think. Can all these difficulties be overcome in time to permit me to appear and arrest this marriage? Scarcely! Well, let the marriage go on if it must, for a while, it will only give me a stronger hold upon *her grace*. Let her wear the strawberry leaves a little while; she will be none the worse, and as she is not Helen, I am not fastidious! Oh, Helen! Helen!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE INTERRUPTED DECLARATION.

Why, I can smile, and murder while I smile,
And cry content to that which grieves my heart,
And wet my cheeks with penitential tears,
And frame my face to all occasions.—*Shakspeare.*

THE marriage of the Duke of Beresleigh and the Lady Etheridge of Swinburne came off with great *éclat*. The ceremony was performed in St. James's Chapel, in the presence of the *élite* of the aristocracy. The Bishop of London officiated. The bride was attended to the altar by the Ladies Wardour, the sisters of the bridegroom, and by Miss Elmer, her particular friend. After the ceremony the bridal party returned to Beresleigh House, where a select party were entertained at breakfast.

Immediately after breakfast, the newly-married pair, amid the hearty congratulations of their friends, set out upon their bridal tour through the North of England and Scotland, intending to proceed thence to the Continent. And their friends soon after dispersed to their several homes.

Laura Elmer returned to her humble duties at Lester House. She felt great London all the lonelier for the want of her friend Rose. Indeed, the young duchess had earnestly entreated Miss Elmer to join her travelling party to the Continent. But Laura had sufficient delicacy and self-denial to decline this proffered pleasure.

After the marriage and departure of the young duke and duchess, Miss Elmer's home with the Lesters was not so agreeable as it had been. Lady Lester, having nothing more to hope from Laura's influence over Rose in favor of Mr. Lester, treated the governess, not with disrespect—for no one durst do that—but with coolness.

Sir Vincent's manner, on the contrary, had grown so attentive as to be troublesome and embarrassing. Even Helen Ravenscroft had disappeared from view. Miss Elmer had neither seen nor heard from her since the day upon which

they had last driven out together, when Mrs. Ravenscroft had thrown the letter from the carriage-window to the stranger who had followed them.

Ferdinand Cassinove kept on the "even tenor" of his laborious life—teaching all day, and reading law all the evening. His patron had grown cold to him; his occasional meetings with Laura Elmer were abridged. By a new regulation of Sir Vincent, the tutor and his solitary pupil took their meals alone together in their study. Well did Mr. Cassinove understand the reasons both of Sir Vincent's coolness to himself, and of his new regulation in regard to the school-room meals, and his heart burned with honest indignation. The chief solace of his life was now the daily "good-morning" and "good-night," when his hand met Laura's hand in a thrilling clasp—when his eyes met Laura's eyes in a passionate glance. In the morning, that clasp, that glance, sent him cheered and strengthened to his daily work; in the evening, sent him comforted and happy to his night's rest. But for this sweet comfort, his warm, southern nature could scarcely have borne the chilling atmosphere of the society in which he lived. And but for the secret instinct that assured him his presence in the house made Laura Elmer's life there all the lighter, he would not have endured his position to the end of the term for which he had been engaged.

And Laura Elmer understood his motives perfectly. No word of love had been uttered between them, their mutual esteem and affection had spoken only through their eloquent eyes. Yet Laura Elmer knew that Ferdinand Cassinove retained his position, and endured a thousand humiliations, only for her sake. Laura Elmer was trying to discipline her own spirit to the difficult habit of controlling her impulses and obeying her principles. Thus, though many impulses of pride, delicacy and self-respect, urged her to quit her situation at once, the single principle of fidelity constrained her to be faithful to her engagement for the whole of the term, at the close of which she resolved, both for her own sake and that of Ferdinand Cassinove, to leave the house. She was writing for several magazines of high character, and drawing a small, but sufficient, income from her literary

works. She determined, at the close of her present engagement, to abandon forever the life of a governess, for which she felt that nature had never intended her, and to find some quiet, respectable lodgings, where she might live independently by the productions of her pen.

In thinking of searching for lodgings in the wilderness of London, her thoughts naturally recurred to Mrs. Russel, the struggling young mother, in whose excellent character and unmerited misfortunes Cassinove had interested her sympathies. She remembered that Ruth Russel was engaged in the difficult task of trying to support her little family by keeping a small shop that would not succeed, and neat lodgings that would not let, and she resolved, at the first opportunity, to get the address of Mrs. Russel from Mr. Cassinove, with the view of inspecting her lodgings, and possibly becoming her tenant.

In the meantime, Miss Elmer addressed a note to Lady Lester, advising her ladyship of her intention to leave at the end of the term. And Laura's resignation was at once accepted, with a few conventional expressions of regret that the young ladies should lose the advantage of the instructions of so accomplished a teacher. And the news got abroad in the household that Miss Elmer was going away.

It was about this time, in the interval between the morning and the afternoon session, that Miss Elmer was sitting alone in the vacant school-room, when there came a rap at the door.

"Come in," said Miss Elmer, expecting to see a servant with a message from Sir Vincent or Lady Lester.

Mr. Cassinove entered the school-room.

His face was pale, and his voice vibrated with intense suppressed emotion, as he said—

"I hope you will pardon this intrusion, and give me a few moments' interview, Miss Elmer."

"Certainly, Mr. Cassinove; pray take a seat," she said, handing a chair, and resuming her own place at her desk.

With a bow, he declined to sit down; but standing before her, and resting one hand upon the back of the chair, he said—

"You are about to leave us, I hear, Miss Elmer?"

"In a few weeks—yes."

"Forgive the question—for another situation?"

"No; when one has discovered that she is not fitted for a particular work, she should abandon it; and when she has found that for which she is best adapted, she should pursue it. I have clearly ascertained that I am not fitted either by ability or inclination for the life of a governess, since I can make myself neither very useful nor very happy in its duties; while I have some gift for scribbling, by which I can give more satisfaction, if not do more good. At least it is my principal talent, and I purpose to give up teaching, take some quiet, pleasant lodgings, and maintain myself by my goose-quill, which already brings me an income sufficient for my few wants."

"You will be more independent, more retired, and happier. I sincerely congratulate you on the change, Miss Elmer. The most humble life of liberty and seclusion is preferable to any life of dependence amid uncongenial associates. And since you speak of going into lodgings, will you permit me to recommend to you my late landlady, Mrs. Russel?"

"Thank you, I was thinking of her."

"She is a gentle and refined woman, unfit to struggle through the world, and hence she does not succeed very well. She has now a pretty little house at Chelsea, the ground floor of which is occupied with her own little shop and family rooms. The upper floor comprises a suite of three or four neat rooms, that she would be glad to let. I think you would like both the landlady and her lodgings."

"I am quite sure that I should. Please give me her exact address," said Laura, taking up a pencil.

Cassinove complied, and while Laura was taking down the address, he gazed upon her beautiful bowed face, as she bent over her desk, until his own face rapidly flushed, and paled, and his breath came short and quick.

She heard—her ear caught that quick, convulsive breathing—and she impulsively looked up just as he stooped and took her hand, and bowing over it, uttered, in a tone scarcely above his breath, yet deep and vibrating with his soul's profound emotion—

"Laura Elmer, I love you. I love you with my whole heart, soul, and spirit. I loved you the first hour that I looked upon your noble face. I have loved you with an ever-increasing power ever since, as I shall love you through all time and through all eternity. I have suppressed the utterance of my love for months, as I ought, perhaps, yet to have suppressed it for years, but I could not be silent longer; I could not stifle my feelings and live. And so I have sought you to-day, Laura Elmer, not in selfishness, not in vanity, not in presumption; not to engage your heart or bind your hand to a poor man, who must yet struggle through many years of labor, privation, and hardship before he can command a position which he would dare ask you to share. No, Laura Elmer, no; I sought you to say that my heart, my brain, my services, my whole life are all your own; to say that I consecrate myself, with all that I am or may become, with all that I have or may acquire, to your service for life and death and eternity, and count myself richer than a monarch, more blessed than an archangel, so you will but accept the offering."

He paused, still breathing low and quick, and raised his eyes, eloquent with emotion, to hers.

Her face, that had been averted, was now turned gently towards him, when, meeting her glances, he exclaimed—

"Oh, heaven! your eyes are full of tears. You do not turn away. My worship is not all wasted. You accept the ovation. Oh, Laura, is it not so? Speak to me! speak to me!"

She placed both her hands in both of his, with a glance that told him all he wished to know.

He caught those white hands and pressed them rapturously to his lips, to his heart, amid exclamations of love and delight, that made him blind, deaf, and insensible to all else on earth or in heaven, blind, deaf, and insensible to the presence of Sir Vincent Lester, who had entered the school-room unannounced, and who now stood gazing upon this love-scene with his dark and handsome face lowering with evil passions, until Laura Elmer raised her eyes, and with a slight exclamation, recognized him and started to her feet.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Elmer; but if this had been another than the school-room, I should not have entered unannounced," said the baronet, with piercing sarcasm.

Ferdinand Cassinove stood up, and, taking the hand of Laura Elmer, confronted Sir Vincent with a proud and joyous expression upon his fine face, saying—

"Sir Vincent Lester, I have the honor to announce to you my engagement to Miss Elmer, who has just blessed my life with the promise of her hand."

"I congratulate you, sir; though your somewhat formal announcement of so evident a fact seems rather a work of supererogation," said the baronet, with freezing hauteur.

Mr. Cassinove bowed coldly.

"And now, sir," continued Sir Vincent, "as the time of an engaged man must be much more valuable to himself than to any one else, I have to inform you that I must, from this day, deny myself your inestimable services, and authorize your departure from my house at your earliest convenience."

Again Cassinove bowed ceremoniously, saying—

"You have anticipated my wishes and purposes in this matter, Sir Vincent. My term is up to-morrow, when I shall relieve you of my presence."

"Pray do not feel obliged to serve to the end of the term for which you were engaged. I quite willingly release you from such an obligation, and promise that, whether you go to-day or to-morrow, the time of your departure shall make no difference in the amount of your wages—a consideration not wholly unimportant, I presume, to a young gentleman who is thinking of setting up an establishment. Therefore, stand not upon the order of your going, but go at once. If you hope to get another situation, however, do not come to me for a character. I cannot conscientiously recommend a tutor who passes his time in making love to the governess, and chooses the school-room as the theatre of his romantic drama!" sneered the baronet, whose face was black with suppressed rage. Then turning to Laura Elmer, with a sarcastic bow, he said—

"I must again beg your pardon, Miss Elmer, for breaking in upon your very interesting little scene, and say, in apology

for my indiscretion, that I would scarcely have expected to find the governess or the school so sentimentally employed."

And with a sardonic smile and bow he left the room.

Cassinove, with his dark eyes blazing with anger, started after him; but quick as lightning Laura Elmer sprang forward and caught his arm, saying—

"Cassinove! Cassinove! pause—control yourself!"

"He has insulted you! I must chastise him! I must and will! I would if he were the king!" exclaimed Cassinove, his whole countenance inflamed with indignation.

"No, no, Ferdinand, you will not, you must not. You will listen to me, and govern yourself. Remember that 'he who ruleth his own spirit is greater than he who taketh a city.' Anger is insensate, irrational. To yield to it is unworthy of a man; keep your own soul in peace; let this insulting baronet go; what is he to us that we should permit him to disturb our repose; to-morrow we shall be clear of him; to-day let us forget him; come, you will yield to me this time?"

He turned towards her, and his anger all melted away in a smile beaming with love, as he exclaimed—

"Yield to you, my love, my lady, my queen! yield to you! Yes! my will, my life, my soul, should you require it of me."

A little longer she detained him, to be sure that his indignation was entirely calmed, and then she dismissed him and summoned her pupils.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MIDNIGHT ALARM.

Foul deeds will rise,
Though all the earth o'erwhelm them to men's eyes,
For murder, though it hath no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ.—*Shakspeare.*

WHEN the afternoon lessons were over, Laura Elmer drove to Chelsea, to inspect the lodgings on the second floor of Mrs. Russel's little cottage. She found the landlady and the lodgings all that Mr. Cassinove had represented them to be.

The cottage was situated in a quiet, clean street, and had the advantage of a fine, shady garden in the rear. The first floor was occupied with a neat little shop in front, and with the landlady's own apartments in the back. The second floor comprised a clean, airy parlor, with white window curtains in front, and an equally clean and airy little chamber, with white draperies, in the back.

Mrs. Russel was the same pleasing little lady that has already been described.

Miss Elmer was more than satisfied with the accommodations offered, and therefore she immediately engaged the apartments, promising to come and take possession in a few days.

When Miss Elmer then mentioned that Mr. Cassinove had recommended the house and the hostess, Mrs. Russel became enthusiastic in her expressions of gratitude for his kindness, admiration of his character, and aspirations for his welfare. Miss Elmer was delighted with her warm encomiums, and in this pleasing frame of mind she took leave.

She returned to Lester House in time for a late tea, and without having a second opportunity of conversing with Cassinove, she retired to her chamber.

Laura went to bed and tried to read herself to sleep, vainly, for she could neither fix her attention to the volume in her hand, nor compose herself to rest.

The day had been too full of strange excitements. Ferdinand Cassinove, whom in her secret heart she had long adored, had declared his love, and she had made him happy by accepting the true heart that he had laid at her feet. They were betrothed. She felt that this assurance should have calmed her spirits, and she wondered why it did not, and why, on the contrary, her soul was oppressed with a gloom that she could not shake off, and haunted with a presentiment of evil which she could by no means exorcise. It was true she knew Lady Lester had no kindly feelings towards her, and also that Sir Vincent Lester hated Cassinove with the intense hatred of jealousy; but then Cassinove, as well as herself, was to leave the house upon the next day, and need never come into collision with the Lesters again.

Thus it could not have been the thought of their animosity that filled her soul with a sense of approaching calamity, vague and terrible as the forms that move through the valley of the shadow of death.

She lay tossing for hours in a state of restlessness that could not be soothed. She heard the latest domestics, one by one, retire to their beds. And long after that, "in the dead waste and middle of the night," her ears, sharpened by nervous excitement, heard the faintest sound in the empty street without or the silent house within. At length all without and within was as still as death. Even her strained sense of hearing could not catch the faintest sound.

The dead silence and darkness was almost suffocating to her preternaturally excited nerves on the *qui vive* of a sort of fearful expectancy.

It was while listening painfully through the deep silence, and gazing intently into the black darkness of her chamber, that a line of red lights, as from a candle, carried in the hall without, glided through the crevice at the bottom of her door, and traversed the length of her darkened chamber walls, and disappeared. At the same moment the stairs leading down to the next floor creaked slowly and softly as under the weight of some cautiously descending step.

Slight as this incident was, in the preternatural excitement

of her nerves, it filled her soul with terror. It was in vain that she assured herself that there was nothing unnatural or alarming in the event, that the midnight walker was merely some domestic passing through the house on some harmless errand of his own. She could not be at rest; her heart stood still with horror! she listened intently as if for some knell of doom. She heard it.

“Murder! murder! murder! murd——”

There was no mistaking those fearful shrieks that broke upon the silent midnight hour, and died away in gurgling inarticulation.

She understood her presentiment now. She sprang from her bed in frantic haste, threw on her dressing-gown, and rushed out into the passage. The alarmed household, startled out of their deep sleep by those frenzied cries, were now in motion, and all hurrying, half-dressed, and with exclamations of astonishment, wonder, and alarm, towards the chamber whence the cries had proceeded. Almost maddened with excitement, Laura Elmer joined them, and the whole party poured into the chamber of Sir Vincent Lester.

There a scene met her view that seemed to congeal to ice every drop of her life-current.

Sir Vincent Lester lay wounded and dying in his bed, his heart's blood spouting in a thick jet from the wound in his side. With the convulsive grasp of the dying, he held Ferdinand Cassinove, who pale, ghastly, and paralyzed with horror, and clutching a poniard in his hand, bent over the murdered man, without attempting to escape.

“In the name of heaven, what is the meaning of this?” exclaimed the butler, while ejaculations of amazement burst from the men, and shrieks of terror from the women.

“He has murdered me! he, he, the wretch!” exclaimed the dying man, starting up and tightening his grasp upon the young man's collar, while, with the violence of the action, the blood spouted in torrents from his mortal wound.

And the next instant the convulsive grasp relaxed, the failing hand fell, and the dying man dropped back upon his pillow—dead.

“For Heaven's sake run for a physician, some one! he

may only have fainted," exclaimed Ferdinand Cassinove, waking as it were from the panic of horror that had bound his senses

Then seeing all eyes fixed upon him in loathing and amazement, and not understanding the meaning of their gaze, yet not willing that a moment should be lost that might be of vital interest to the victim, he exclaimed, earnestly :

"Hasten ! fly ! for Heaven's sake fly for a physician ! A moment may save or lose your master's life !"

Perceiving that no one offered to obey, while all continued to glare upon him in detestation and horror, he said to the butler :

"Watson, look to your master ! You have some experience. Apply restoratives vigorously, while I hasten myself to bring surgical help."

And he moved towards the door.

Here he was intercepted by the crowd of domestics, who, roused from their apathy of horror, roughly barred his way, with exclamations of—

"No, you don't, though !"

"You'd cut and run, would you !"

"Don't you hope you may, you raskil ?"

"Oh, won't you swing for it, though !"

"Hold on, you ! Stay where you are, will you !"

"Don't let him get away ! Seize holt on him, Jeemes !"

"Go for the perlice !"

The confusion was indescribable.

"Friends, what do you mean by hindering me ? Let me pass. I must hurry at once to bring a physician. Don't you see that life and death hang upon every moment ?" exclaimed Cassinove, in an agony of anxiety to save his enemy, if there should be yet a shadow of hope.

"Oh, yes, we know that *your* life or death hangs upon every instant, and you'll hang yourself pretty soon ! Here comes Mr. Watson ! hear what *he* says about it," said James, the ladies' footman.

Watson, the butler, who had been anxiously examining the condition of the baronet, now left the bedside and stood among his fellow-servants, pale as death.

"A physician should be instantly summoned," again began Cassinove anxiously to say, when the butler gravely interrupted him.

"Mr. Cassinove, no physician can bring the dead to life, and my master, Sir Vincent Lester, is quite dead; but, for all that, I will send for one. James, you go at once, and rouse up Doctor Clark, and tell him what has happened, and ask him to please to come at once. He will know what is best to be done, and how to tell my lady. And then, James, when—when you have told the doctor, go to Bow-street, and bring a pair of policemen. And mind, James, that you do not say one word to any one else as to what has occurred in this house until you are required to do so."

James was about to start upon his errand, when Cassinove, starting forward, said:

"Send the footman at once to Bow street. I will go myself for the family physician."

"No, you don't, though! no, you don't!" cried one of the servants, intercepting him.

"We should never see the sight of *your* face again if we were green enough to let you go!" exclaimed another, joining the opposition.

"What is the meaning of all this? Has horror deprived you of your senses?" inquired Cassinove, looking in amazement from one to another, and reading only abhorrence upon every face.

"I am afraid, Mr. Cassinove, that we must not let you leave the room," said the butler, gravely.

"Not let me leave the room! What do you mean, fellow?" questioned Cassinove, indignantly.

"I am afraid, sir, we dare not do it," persisted the butler.

"Explain yourself!" peremptorily demanded Cassinove.

"The circumstances, sir! the circumstances!"

"*What* circumstances, fellow?"

"The circumstances we found you in when we burst into the room at the cries of murder, sir; our master murdered, and dying, weltering in his blood; you standing over him with the dripping dagger in your hand," said the butler, shuddering with horror at the recollection.

Young Cassinove turned ghastly white, reeled, and dropped into the nearest seat, struck for the first time by the overwhelming force of the circumstantial evidence against himself. Then recovering, with a great effort, and wiping the drops of agony from his brow, he gasped forth the words—

“But I had rushed at the first cry for help to the assistance of Sir Vincent; I had been, as usual, reading late in the study, as is my custom, when I heard the cry of ‘murder’ from Sir Vincent’s room. I sprang up, and rushed in at once; as I ran along the hall, I thought a figure rushed past me in the opposite direction, but I hurried on, and was the first to enter Sir Vincent’s room; I found him in the first spasm of the wound; I raised him in my arms, and drew out the poniard; he clutched me in his dying agony, and cried, a little wildly and incoherently, ‘Pursue him! pursue him!’ and the next instant the room was filled with you all as it is now.”

“Yes, Mr. Cassinove, that sounds fair and reasonable enough, and I hope it may be as you say, and may do you good with the magistrate, but the last words of my master, Mr. Cassinove—the last words of my master.”

“Well—what were they? I was so overwhelmed with horror that I did not distinctly hear them.”

“They accused you as his murderer, Mr. Cassinove.”

“Never! never!” cried Ferdinand Cassinove.

“Yes, sir; I am sorry to say they did. Think of it. Oh, it was horrible, sir! It chills my very heart to think of it now. Recollect the circumstances, sir. You were standing over him with the reeking dagger in your hand. He had you by the collar in his dying grasp, and with his dying lips he said:

“‘He has murdered me—he, he, the wretch!’

“But I was there to save him. He clutched me only in his mortal death-throes. His wild words referred only to the wretch who really did assassinate him, and not to me,” explained Cassinove, in consternation at the increasing force of the fatal circumstantial evidence.

“It all sounds quite reasonable, Mr. Cassinove, sir, and I hope it may prove true; but that will be for his worship, the magistrate, to judge of, and not for me. Meantime, it is our

duty to keep you here until the police come," replied the butler, gravely.

"But, good heaven! you cannot imagine that I could commit a crime of that sort!" exclaimed Cassinove, overwhelmed by the horrible suspicion.

"Can't say nothing about it, Mr. Cassinove. Seems to me, with our master lying there, ghastly, in a pool of his own blood, as if I were suffering under a nightmare and couldn't wake up!" groaned Watson.

"But what motive, good heaven, could any one suppose me to have for such a horrible deed?" exclaimed Cassinove.

"Can't say, Mr. Cassinove; but all the house knows that there was no good blood between you and our unfortunate master. Besides, the Holy Bible says that 'jealousy is as cruel as the grave.'"

Cassinove covered his face with his hands, and sunk groaning into his seat. The last words of the butler supplied all that was wanting in the chain of evidence against him—the motive for the deed!

Scarcely a moment had he sat thus with his face buried in his hands, when he felt a light touch upon his shoulder, and heard a gentle voice at his ear, murmuring softly:

"Take courage; you are guiltless, and your innocence will be made clear."

He looked up, and saw Laura Elmer, pale but firm, standing by his side.

"Oh, Miss Elmer! you at least do not suspect me of this awful crime?" he cried, wildly.

"I suspect you?—not for an instant! It were treason, sacrilege in me to do so! No! my life, my soul upon your innocence of this charge! Take courage. There is one in Heaven who knows your innocence—your Creator! and there are two on earth—the wretch who really committed the crime, and whom Providence may bring to justice, and your promised wife, who, come what may, will keep her faith, and share your fate, live with you if it be life, die with you if it be death! Be of good courage, therefore."

"Oh, my love! my life! my lady! I am, I am! I will droop no more! I can bear to be convicted in the opinion

of the whole world so as you know me to be guiltless. I could bear even an ignominious death, supported by the thought of your esteem," exclaimed the young man, in a deep, impassioned tone, that met only her listening ear.

"It will not come to that; God is just; your innocence of this charge shall be made manifest."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE FATAL EVIDENCE.

True, conscious honor is to feel no sin:
He's armed without, who's innocent within.
Be this his sword and this his shield of brass.—*Horace.*

THEIR conversation was interrupted by the hasty and agitated arrival of the family physician, and the return of the footman accompanied by the Bow street officers. Then followed a scene of hurry and excitement, in which every new-comer wished to ask questions, and every abider in the chamber of death to answer them. This was claimed at last by Dr. Clark, and the Bow street magistrate, who commanded all to be quiet, and then proceeded to the careful examination of the body of the baronet, who was officially pronounced to be, as all present knew that he been for an hour, quite dead. The body was then covered over, and ordered to be left undisturbed until the arrival of the coroner.

The circumstances of the discovery of the dreadful tragedy were then required and detailed. The butler being the spokesman of the assembled household, related that they had been roused from their sleep by cries of murder that were soon smothered and drowned; that they had hurried in alarm to Sir Vincent's chamber, whence the cries proceeded, and where they found their master wounded and dying, yet clutching with his dying hand the collar of Ferdinand Cassinove, who stood over him, reeking dagger in hand, and

accusing with his dying lips the same Ferdinand Cassinove of his murder.

At this point of the narrative all eyes were turned again in consternation and horror upon Mr. Cassinove, who stood up, sustained in spirit only by the presence and sympathy of one heroic woman.

"Do not stand so amazed; answer for yourself, beloved; explain, they must believe you," whispered Laura Elmer, encouragingly.

And thus adjured, Ferdinand Cassinove stood forward, and was about to speak when the officer said, gravely:

"You had best be silent, Mr. Cassinove, and not commit yourself by unadvised words. Your position appears to me to be a very serious one."

"And, therefore, the greater reason why I should account for the circumstances of suspicion in which I was found at the bedside of Sir Vincent Lester," said Mr. Cassinove, firmly; and he commenced and gave the same natural explanation that he had already given to the assembled household.

"I believe it will prove as you say, sir; but we must detain all here until a magistrate has taken the evidence," said Doctor Clark, who, now that this matter was settled, suddenly bethought himself of the awfully bereaved widow, and inquired:

"Where is Lady Lester? How has she borne this tremendous calamity?"

"Her ladyship knows nothing about it yet, sir. We thought it was best to wait for your arrival before breaking it to my lady," said the butler.

"You were quite right; but is it possible that Lady Lester has been able to sleep through all this disturbance?"

"It appears so, indeed, sir," answered the man.

It was true that the calm, phlegmatic Lady Lester was the soundest sleeper in the family, except, perhaps, the fat housekeeper, Mrs. Judd, who was also heavily snoring away these hours of unparalleled family distress.

Doctor Clark decided that Lady Lester should be permitted to sleep her sleep out, and not be disturbed until her usual hour for rising, as when she had breakfasted and composed

herself for the morning, she would be in a better condition to bear the terrible shock than she could be now, if roused prematurely to be told that she was so awfully widowed.

Day broke and the sun rose upon the distressed household, and upon the ghastly form of the murdered man.

The coroner arrived, and being assisted by two eminent magistrates, sat upon the case. After the most careful investigation of the circumstances, and a thorough sifting of the evidence, they brought in their verdict—

“Sir Vincent Lester came to his death on the morning of the first of October, between two and three o’clock, by a wound inflicted with a dagger, in the left ventricle of the heart, by the hands of Ferdinand Cassinove.”

And Ferdinand Cassinove was fully committed to Newgate upon the charge of wilful murder.

A feeling of delicacy towards Laura Elmer, who had not been present at the coroner’s inquest, restrained him from asking to see her before he was taken away.

But Laura, in her distant chamber, had heard from the excited talk of the servants the verdict of the coroner’s inquest; and she went down, and waited in the hall until Cassinove passed along in custody of the officers. Then she went and gave him her hand, saying:

“Be comforted, Mr. Cassinove; *I* know that you are guiltless of this charge, and at the day of trial the world shall know it, too. I will employ all the faculties that God has given me in your service; and perhaps the mental acumen of a deeply interested woman may be more than equal to the experience of a detective policeman. I have strong hope.”

“Miss Elmer, your unshaken confidence in me is, at this hour, my greatest earthly comfort and support. May God bless you!” replied Cassinove, with deep emotion.

“I will be with you again in the course of the day. The poor bereaved children of this house must be comforted and soothed as soon as they awake to the bitter knowledge of their loss. As soon as that duty is performed, I will visit and consult farther with you. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye! good-bye! and may Heaven bless you for your goodness, Laura Elmer.”

And thus they parted—Cassinove to Newgate, in custody of the officers, and Laura back into the house of mourning.

It was near noon when Lady Lester's bell rang; and it was two hours later that the family physician sought her presence and carefully broke to her the news of her bereavement. The shock was tremendous, and overwhelmed for the moment even her cold, hard, unloving nature. Her attendants were summoned in haste to put their mistress to bed; and the utmost skill of the physician was taxed to assuage her nervous sufferings.

Laura Elmer waited to be of service; but almost the first intelligible words that Lady Lester spoke were—

“Has that Miss Elmer gone?”

She was answered that Miss Elmer remained to see if she could be of any use in the present extreme distress of the family.

“Tell her no; beg her to go at once. I could not bear the sight of her, I am sure. It was all her doing; all her unprincipled coquetry. She flirted with Cassinove, and encouraged Sir Vincent, and played them off, one against the other, in the most infamous manner, until she maddened both with jealousy, as every one in the house could swear,” said her ladyship, breaking into a fresh paroxysm of emotion.

Laura Elmer had meantime gently and tenderly informed the children of the sudden death of their father, withholding for the present the manner of his death; she had borne all the burthen of their wild grief until the storm exhausted itself for the time; she had then soothed and comforted them in the best manner she could, and left them quiet, in the care of their good nurse, Rachel.

Next she went into the library, and wrote letters to Mr. Ruthven Lester, who was then at Bath, and to other near friends of the family, telling him merely of the sudden death of the baronet, and suggesting the need of their immediate presence in the house. She had despatched these letters to the post, and was engaged in writing a note, summoning the family solicitor, when the door opened, and Dr Clark entered, and made known to her the wish of Lady Lester.

Miss Elmer, now that she had done all that she was able

to do for the assistance of the distressed family, and much also that others in the excitement of the day had forgotten or neglected to perform, was really not sorry to be set at liberty.

"Shall I go in and take leave of her ladyship?" inquired Laura.

"No, I think not, Miss Elmer; Lady Lester is sleeping under the influence of a powerful narcotic, and must not be disturbed for hours," said the doctor, who in no degree credited the charges of her ladyship against the noble-looking girl before him.

"Then I will leave with you my adieu to Lady Lester, and beg you to assure her of my deep sympathy," said Laura.

"I will not fail to do so, or to let her ladyship know how much we are all indebted to your self-possession, forethought, and activity in the present distressing crisis. You have thought of every thing that was forgotten, and done every thing that was neglected by others."

"I have done only what I felt constrained to do under the circumstances, and if there is any thing else in which I can be of use, I hope you will let me know."

"Certainly, Miss Elmer; you are exceedingly kind and disinterested in the assistance you have given this afflicted family, especially when your private griefs and anxieties must have pressed heavily upon your mind and heart," said the doctor, kindly.

At this first word of sympathy Laura's fine eyes filled with tears.

"You do not believe Ferdinand Cassinove to be guilty?" she said.

"No, no, on my soul and honor, no; I have observed the young man ever since he has been in the family; it is impossible he could have been guilty of such a crime."

"The Lord in heaven bless you for these words."

"But oh! I fear it will be difficult to make a judge and jury believe as we do," said Laura, involuntarily wringing her hands over each other in the extremity of her distress.

"We must trust in God, employ the most cunning detectives to trace out the real criminal, and engage the best counsel for the defence of the supposed one."

"*We*—do you say *we*? Oh, Doctor Clark, am I to understand that your sympathies are entirely with us, and that you will assist us with your greater experience and advice?" asked Laura, clasping her hands and looking imploringly into the good physician's venerable face.

"Yes, my child, yes; not only with my advice, but with my purse and my active assistance. I consider it a duty, due not only to the cause of humanity, but to the cause of justice, and not only to the wrongfully-accused prisoner, but to my deceased friend, to try to discover the real murderer."

"Heaven bless you, Doctor Clark, for the comfort you have given me," exclaimed Laura Elmer, fervently.

"You are going, I heard you say, to visit the young man in prison?"

"Yes; he has neither mother nor sister in the world; he has no relative on earth that I know of; he has only me, his promised wife, and I must go to him, let the bad world say what it will," said Laura, firmly.

"You are quite right, my dear; but Newgate is not exactly the place to visit alone, especially for the first time. You must let me take you there, my dear, and make you known to the governor, after which you will be able to repeat your visit without the fear of rudeness from the officials. I shall be at liberty to attend you at four o'clock this afternoon. In the meantime, my dear, you had better, for your own comfort, see to your removal. Have you secured lodgings?"

"Yes, Doctor Clark, very good ones, with a friend of Mr. Cassinove's, at Chelsea."

"Then send your luggage on at once with a note to your landlady. Then, at four o'clock, I will take you to Newgate, where we can see and consult with this much-injured young man, and afterwards I can set you down at your lodgings," said the venerable physician, as, with an encouraging pressure of her hand, he left Laura Elmer.

Miss Elmer despatched the note that she had been writing to the family solicitor, and then repaired to her chamber, packed and sent off her boxes, with a brief note, to Mrs. Russel, saying only that she would be with her later in the afternoon.

Miss Elmer considerably refrained from trying the spirits of the distressed children, by taking a formal leave of them, and contented herself by leaving with the nurse an affectionate message for the little girls.

Punctually at four o'clock the doctor's carriage was at the door, and Laura, accompanied by her kind old friend, departed for that old abode of sin and sorrow, Newgate.

A half-hour's ride brought them to the gloomy prison.

Doctor Clark took Miss Elmer first into the apartments of the governor, to whom he made some communication apart to secure his *protégée* civility and attention in her future visits to the prison.

Then, attended by an officer, they went to the cell in which Ferdinand Cassinove was confined.

The young man received them calmly and even cheerfully; thanking Doctor Clark for his attention in escorting Laura Elmer to the prison, and silently blessing his betrothed with a most eloquent glance for the comfort she brought in coming to visit him. He had recovered from the first stunning effect of his arrest and imprisonment upon the heinous charge of murder, and was prepared to take a calm view of his position and prospects. He offered the only chair in his cell to Miss Elmer, and invited Doctor Clark to sit beside him on the cot bedstead. Then the three entered into conversation upon the best course to be pursued for his defence. Cassinove again repeated to his friends all the circumstances of his presence in the bed-chamber of Sir Vincent immediately after the murder. The doctor advised him to reduce that statement carefully to writing, and to put it into the hands of his counsel. He then informed the young man of the determination that Miss Elmer and himself had come to, namely, to employ the most cunning detectives in searching for the discovery of the murderer, and engaging the most eminent counsel in defending the case of the prisoner. And that he should take this course, not only in respect to humanity and justice endangered in the person of his young friend, but in regard to old friendships in that of his deceased patron.

Cassinove thanked him with deep emotion. They remained consulting with, encouraging and comforting the young man.

until the hour arrived at which the prison-doors were to be closed for the night, and then, with the promise to send an eminent lawyer to see the prisoner in the morning, and to visit him every day, the good doctor took leave, and brought Miss Elmer away.

And in another hour he set her down at Daisy Cottage, Hay-lane, Chelsea.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE NOCTURNAL VISIT.

And hollow, strange, unprecedented sounds,
And earnest whisperings ran along the halls
At dead of night ; and long, deep, endless sighs
Came from the dreary room.—*Pollock.*

THE sun was setting when Laura Elmer alighted from the doctor's carriage, bade him good-afternoon, and entered the little gate leading up a shaded walk to the door of Laburnum cottage, at the head of Hay-lane, where Mrs. Russel kept her little shop, and let her neat lodgings.

Miss Elmer did not know whether Mrs. Russel had as yet heard of the tragedy at Lester House, and its calamitous consequences to their mutual friend, and she almost dreaded to meet her landlady.

But the moment Mrs. Russel opened the door in answer to her knock, Miss Elmer saw that she knew the worst. The poor little woman's eyes were red and swollen with tears, and her first words were :

"Oh, Miss Elmer ! Oh, Miss Elmer ! what shall I do !"

"Trust in God and do all that we can," replied Laura, in a low voice, as she pressed the hand that was held out to her.

"Oh, you say that, Miss Elmer, but you do not know all the poor young gentleman was to me and my children, or you could not speak so calmly. He was almost our only friend ; he would, and, indeed, he *did*, divide his last sovereign with

us. I loved him like a brother," exclaimed the poor woman, speaking of Cassinove in the past tense, as one already dead.

She conducted Miss Elmer into the neat back parlor, where a bright little fire was burning, while the last beams of the setting sun were glancing through the vine-shaded windows, and the little table was neatly set for tea.

She relieved Miss Elmer of her bonnet and mantle, and placed her in the pleasantest seat, between the cheerful window and the lively fire and the cosy table.

She poured out the tea, and served her guest with toast, and then her spirits quite broke down.

"I remember it was under just such circumstances that Jonathan Bradford, poor man, was executed. He heard a cry of murder in the night, and rushed into his guest's bedroom, just in time to see the murderer escape by the open window. He picked up the razor with which the victim's throat had been cut, and was found with it, standing over the murdered man, by the assembled household. It was no use for him to explain; his innocence did him no good with the judge and jury, and he was hanged, and it was years and years after that the real murderer, who was brought to the gallows for another crime, confessed the deed for which poor Jonathan Bradford was executed. And so it will be with poor Mr. Cassinove—I know it. I know it. Oh, oh, oh, what shall I do?" cried the poor woman, bursting into a fresh flood of tears.

"Oh, heaven! let us hope not. Such a case as that of poor Bradford should be a warning forever against the acceptance of circumstantial evidence, and must be a powerful argument against the conviction of Mr. Cassinove!" exclaimed Laura Elmer, appalled at the picture of probabilities sketched by Mrs. Russel.

"But the circumstances are even stronger against poor Mr. Cassinove. He was not only found with the dagger, standing over the murdered man, but he was accused by the dying words of Sir Vincent as the murderer," said Mrs. Russel, who seemed fated to take the gloomiest view of the case; and, indeed, whose many sorrows had taught her always to despair rather than to hope.

"But I wouldn't believe it! I wouldn't believe it! no, not if Sir Vincent, instead of being a worldly baronet, had been a saintly bishop, and had sworn it on the holy Bible with his last breath!" she added, indignantly.

"I do not think that the last rather incoherent words of Sir Vincent Lester should be construed into an accusation of Mr. Cassinove, since there was no name mentioned."

"But the judge and jury *will* construe it so, you'll see," sighed the desponding woman.

"I hope not; I believe wherever there is a reasonable doubt, an English jury will lean to the side of mercy," said the hopeful girl.

"Did they do it on the coroner's inquest? No, the blood-thirsty wretches, they did not!"

"Do not be unjust, Mrs. Russel: remember that the coroner's jury only by their verdict sent the case up to a higher court. Great injustice has been done to Mr. Cassinove; but let us not, therefore, too severely blame those who conscientiously performed their duty."

"Oh, you do not take his part zealously, because you do not feel as I do about him. The dear young gentleman was nothing to you, Miss Elmer. And now that he is in disgrace down there in Newgate, under the charge of murder, having his name bruited all over the earth as the assassin of his patron, and all the world calling down imprecations upon him as an unnatural monster, with the certainty of an ignominious death, and a shameful grave before him, perhaps it would not be discreet in a young lady to speak a word in his defence, or even to acknowledge that she had ever known him," said Mrs. Russel, bitterly, for many disappointments, wrongs, and sorrows had infused a good deal of the rue into her composition.

Laura Elmer's fine face flushed all over. The tears rushed to her dark eyes. She loved Mrs. Russel for her warm, earnest, angry defence of Cassinove. She arose and grasped the hand of her landlady, and her voice vibrated deeply with her strong emotion, as she said:

"I am the betrothed wife of Ferdinand Cassinove. I stood by him in his trouble; I visited him in prison; I have but

just left his cell; I shall visit him daily; and if discreet friends object to that, I shall redeem my pledge by giving him my hand, and winning the wife's privilege of remaining with him to the last."

"Is it so? Oh, Miss Elmer, is it so? And I have been so unjust in my thoughts of you! On my knees I would beg your pardon! You have a noble heart! a great, grand heart! And I could so mistake you! I saw that you looked pale and haggard when you came in, but I thought that you were only fatigued and indisposed, and that a cup of tea would set you right; and I was, besides, too much absorbed in my distress about my poor young Cassinove to think much about any thing else. But now—but now—oh! my dear young lady, how much you really do suffer! I see it in you. Oh, my dear, command me. I will do any thing on earth to serve you or him!" said Mrs. Russel, sobbing afresh.

"I thank you from my heart, dear friend. I know that you are a true friend to Mr. Cassinove. I will be sure to let you know if you can do any thing more for him than give him your welcome sympathy," said Laura Elmer, warmly.

"You may be sure he has that always. You saw him in prison to-day? How is the dear, young gentleman? How does he bear his misfortune?"

"Like himself: thinking more of the sorrows of others than of his own danger; thinking more of the dead baronet, sent prematurely to his account, and the awfully bereaved and afflicted friends, than of his own sufferings and perils."

"God bless him! God deliver him!"

"He will! He has already raised up a zealous and powerful friend in Dr. Clark. I shall also write to my friend, the young Duchess of Beresleigh, and may count upon her influence with the duke. They will, in all probability, be here before the trial comes on. And though wealth and rank cannot always turn aside the course of justice, yet in a case of injustice such as this, it is well to have powerful friends at work for us. I shall, besides, follow a slight clue that I have to the real murderer."

"A clue to the real murderer!" exclaimed the landlady, in a sort of fury of exultation.

"Yes—hush! the utmost secrecy and caution will be necessary to my success."

"Why did you not give this clue at the inquest?"

"Because, in the first consternation and anguish produced by the discovery of the murder and the accusation of Ferdinand Cassinove, it had not occurred to me. Besides, the clue is so slight that no one but myself would think it of the least importance; it is only a private conviction that proves to me its value. And lastly, this clue, to lead us to discovery, must be followed up with the utmost caution. To have it discussed would only be to warn those whom I wish to take off their guard."

"But how can you investigate the truth without speaking of this clue?"

"I shall get Doctor Clark to seek out one of those thorough-bred sleuth-hounds of the police called detectives. To such an one, under the strictest injunctions to secrecy, I shall give the clue, that he may use his utmost skill and experience in following it up. You look at me in surprise and wonder. Well, I know that you are faithful, and devoted to Mr. Cassinove, yet, as a secret is no longer a secret when shared by two, I must require you to give me your word of honor never to mention the circumstance before I confide it to your keeping," said Miss Elmer.

"I give you my word of honor that I will never divulge the secret with which you intrust me; yet, Miss Elmer, if you have any doubt upon the subject, do not tell me."

"I have none at all. Forgive me if my anxiety upon Mr. Cassinove's account has made me over cautious; and now listen." And Laura Elmer related to Mrs. Russel the events at Lester House connected with the mysterious inmate, Helen Ravenscroft, and the stranger who dogged her carriage in the park, dwelling especially upon the extreme agitation and the inexplicable words of Sir Vincent, when he heard the circumstances from her own lips, and the subsequent midnight interview between Sir Vincent and the stranger, whom she had accidentally discovered through the open library door, while going down to the drawing-room to recover a forgotten book with which she wished to read herself to sleep upon the night in question.

"Now," concluded Miss Elmer, "I have nothing but my own instincts to guide me in my judgment, that this unknown man is the murderer of Sir Vincent. I shall therefore instruct Mr. Cassinove's counsel to subpoena this Helen Ravenscroft as a witness for the defence, and have her examined if she can be found. She has disappeared from the house for the last few weeks."

Laura Elmer spoke with an earnestness and an absorption in her subject that rendered her unobservant to its effects upon Mrs. Russel. Now, however, she looked up to see the eyes of the poor woman wide open with astonishment, and her cheeks white with fear. Laura Elmer noted these signs of emotion, and proceeded—

"Now, Mrs. Russel, this man must be found, his peculiar relations with the family of Sir Vincent Lester must be explained; and by these means I have strong hopes that the truth may be discovered, and Mr. Cassinove's innocence made manifest."

The landlady replied not one word, but her eyes seemed to grow larger and larger in amazement.

"Mrs. Russel, you can materially aid us in the discovery of this strange man," said Laura Elmer, fixing her eyes upon the face of the other.

"Me! me! how ever could I help you?" exclaimed the landlady, in consternation, clasping and wringing her pale fingers.

"I will explain. Upon the very first meeting of Mrs. Ravenscroft and this unknown, your children, who were near at hand, recognized the man, and called your own attention to him. You can tell us who he is."

"Oh, my Lord! my Lord! how sorrows and difficulties thicken around me!" exclaimed the poor woman, wildly.

"This man was recognized by your children as the one who robbed your shop, and whom you so strangely refused to prosecute. Mrs. Russel, I adjure you to tell me—who was this man?" inquired Laura Elmer, firmly.

"Oh, my Lord! my Lord! to what straits am I reduced!" cried the woman, distractedly.

"Who was this man?"

"Oh, do not make me tell you! do not! it cannot serve you or Mr. Cassinove to know!"

All the strong will of Laura Elmer was aroused. She arose from her seat, and standing before the distressed woman took both her wrists, and held them firmly, and gazing with magnetic power into her eyes, into her soul, said—

"Mrs. Russel, I will not appeal to your friendship, or gratitude, or compassion for your benefactor suffering horribly under the dreadful imputation of murder, and in imminent peril of dying a shameful death——"

"Oh, no! don't! don't! don't!" cried the woman.

"But to your sense of justice," continued Laura, gazing with a controlling power into the eyes of the shrinking woman. "Mrs. Russel, justice is the most sacred thing on earth—it is above friendship, gratitude, compassion, family interest, family ties, every thing under heaven! In the sacred name of justice, I adjure you, tell me who is this man?"

"Oh, it would avail you little to know! He is one with whom I was intimate long ago. I had not seen him for years when I saw him for an instant that day in the park. I have not seen him since. I do not know where he is. I have not even the least knowledge whether he is in or out of England. I know no more of him, so help me Heaven."

"Mrs. Russel," continued Laura, without for an instant withdrawing her controlling gaze, "you are believed to be a widow—are you such?"

"In fate; but not in fact!"

"This man, then, was your husband?"

"Yes, yes!"

"He left you?"

"He was *obliged* to do it."

"He was a fugitive from justice?"

"Yes, yes! Oh, it is very cruel to say so!"

"No, it is only just. His name, then, is Russel?"

"Oh, no!"

"What! Then you do not go by his name?"

"No, no! I would not, after—after he fled!"

"Why not?"

"It would have ruined me! I took my maiden name, and moved into another neighborhood where I was not known. I dressed in widow's weeds because it seemed more quiet and respectable for a lone young mother struggling through the world! God forgive me, I did not mean to act a falsehood!"

"What was the nature of this crime which was so heinous as to compel the innocent wife of the criminal to change her name and place of residence to escape reflected ruin?"

"Oh, do not ask me! Do not! do not!" cried poor Mrs. Russel, while shudders of horror convulsed her fragile form.

"It could have been no ordinary crime! The unfortunate wives of homicides are not obliged to change their names and neighborhoods. Well, I will not insist upon the nature of the man's offence against society. But in the name and for the sake of stern justice, I *must* have his real name!"

"Oh! to tell you that will be to tell you all!" cried the poor woman, in an agony of distress.

"I adjure you, Mrs. Russel, in the sacred cause of justice, tell me the name of that man!"

"Oh! oh! stoop, then! Stoop close then! I cannot bear to speak it aloud—looking in your face, with your eyes upon me!"

Laura Elmer stooped her ear close to the woman's lips, saying—

"Courage! It is but a word!"

Mrs. Russel shivered through all her frame, as she whispered—

"It was——"

The last word, the fatal name, was audible only to Laura Elmer, who suddenly dropped the hands of the woman, and, appalled by horror, sank into the nearest seat.

And no word was spoken between them for some minutes. At last—

"Heaven have mercy on you, most miserable of women!" said Miss Elmer.

And, rising, she went and took and pressed her hands, saying—

"Forgive me if I have deeply probed your sorely wounded heart, and believe me I will deal as tenderly by your feelings as I can in justice to another."

"I know it, Miss Elmer! I know it! You are perfectly right. Do not consider me in the slightest degree. Go on, and 'let justice be done, though the heavens fall.'"

And longer the friends talked; but the dreaded name was not again mentioned between them. The two children who had been sent out into the garden to play now came in, and the confidential conversation was interrupted.

Mrs. Russel showed her lodger up into her private apartments where fires had been lighted, and her luggage conveyed, and bade her good-night at the bed-room door.

Laura entered the neat and quiet chamber, where the snow-white curtains of the windows and the bed, and the clean hearth and bright fire, diffused an air of purity and cheerfulness through the scene.

She could not sleep; but drawing an easy-chair beside the little table before the fire, she fell into deep and severe thought upon the subject of the probable assassin of the baronet.

Painfully and intensely as she thought, she was still, as it were, externally conscious of the sounds without. She heard Ruth Russel and her children moving about; she heard the murmuring of their evening prayers at their mother's knee; she heard that poor mother take them into the little chamber adjoining the back-parlor below; and the muffled shuffling with which the little ones got to bed; next she heard Mrs. Russel return to the back-parlor, and settle herself in her seat, probably to sew for hours,—for every sound was audible all over that small house. At last all was perfectly quiet, nothing breaking the silence except the hourly striking of the old-fashioned clock in the passage below. Laura sat intently thinking as the hours slowly passed. The clock struck twelve, and still she sat and thought; one, and still she never changed her attitude; two and she had not even once looked up, or remembered that it was at that witching hour on the preceding night that the awful cry of murder had rung through Lester House, appalling the inmates, arousing the sleepers. She was still buried in thought between two and three o'clock, when she was startled by the sound of a step heard in the deep silence, coming up the walk from the little gate to the cottage door. Every thing alarmed her now; she listened

and heard a light, cautious tapping at the cottage door, and heard the landlady go to the door, and ask in a low, trembling voice :

"Who's there? What do you want?"

"It is I, Ruth, and I want to come in," answered a low voice without.

"Oh, my Lord in heaven, have pity on us! Oh! why do you come here?" inquired the poor woman, in a low, suffocating voice.

"Because I am dying to see you and the children, Ruth. Think what a long exile I have had from you both, my dear."

"Oh, where do you come from, and why do you come, knowing the danger?"

"I come from abroad, because I could not longer live away from you, Ruth. I have been but a few hours in London, and have only within the last hour discovered your residence."

"But the danger! the danger of returning!"

"Bah! my dear, I am forgotten; besides, the 'danger' is very much modified by an event that has occurred within the last twenty-four hours. But all this time you are keeping me out in the cold. Come, let me in, there's a duck."

"Oh, heaven of heavens, to what straits I am reduced!" again complained the poor woman.

"Come, come, Ruth, this is a very cold reception. Unbar the door, there's a darling."

Sobbing bitterly, Mrs. Russel unbarred the door, and admitted the nocturnal visitor.

Still sobbing bitterly she said something about a "lodger," and from that moment the conversation was carried on in so low a whisper, that although Laura Elmer heard the murmuring, she could not distinguish the words. This low, muttering conversation went on all night—went on till day was dawning in the east, when Laura Elmer, worn out by two nights' watching, dropped asleep in her chair, and slept heavily for many hours.

When she awoke it was broad day; the sun was high in the heavens. She opened her eyes and looked around in

astonishment at finding herself in a strange place, and it was some seconds before she could remember how she came there. Then full consciousness of her misfortunes returned: the murder of Sir Vincent Lester; the imprisonment of Ferdinand Cassinove; her own change of residence; the discovery in regard to Mrs. Russel's husband; and, lastly, the strange nocturnal visit, all recurred clearly to her memory.

Her resolution was soon taken. She arose and bathed her feverish face, and arranged her disordered hair, and then rang her bell.

Mrs. Russel, pale and haggard, as with fatigue and care, entered the room, saying:

"I hope you rested well, Miss Elmer."

"No; I have not been in bed all night. I have something to say to you this morning, Mrs. Russel; but first sit down; you look, indeed, quite unable to stand."

Mrs. Russel dropped into the nearest seat.

Miss Elmer resumed her easy-chair, saying:

"I am exceedingly sorry for you, Mrs. Russel, but that does not alter the course of my duty. I must tell you that I heard the arrival of your visitor last night, and overheard much of your conversation, by which I was enabled to identify the individual. This morning I must lay before the police all the particulars with which I have become acquainted, as well as my own private suspicions. As I cannot consistently continue in your house while engaged in this ungracious work, I must leave you to-day. But you will permit me to pay you for the whole term for which my lodgings were engaged; and I wish you, besides, to rest assured of my esteem and friendship, and willing services in every thing in which I can aid you without injuring the cause of justice."

"Miss Elmer, I cannot complain, cruelly as I suffer in this affair; I know that you are perfectly right in all that you do. But poor as I am, I cannot and will not receive payment for the lodgings that you have occupied only a day, and that you leave this morning, not from caprice, but from a sort of necessity," said Mrs. Russel, weeping piteously.

"I am glad you perceive I can do no otherwise than I am about to do. But for your children's sake, I wish you would

permit me to pay for the whole term for which I took the lodgings; it is usual to do so when one leaves before the term is up."

"Yes; but not when they have been occupied but for a day, and are left from necessity; so let us say no more about it, Miss Elmer."

Laura perceived that to press this point would only wound the sensitive self-respect of the poor woman, and desisted.

"You forbear making any inquiries about my visitor of last night, Miss Elmer; yet this piece of information I will volunteer. He is off again, and I know not where he has gone, or when he will come back, or if he ever will return," said Mrs. Russel.

"And after the manner of such villains, he has taken away all your funds with him?" said Laura, indignantly.

Mrs. Russel evidently could not deny this fact.

"Then I will tell you when he will return—as soon as that money is exhausted. Mrs. Russel, I should think you would be glad of any law that would free you entirely from such a beast of prey."

"Ah! but my children."

"Even for *their* sake it were well that such a moral leper were swept from the face of the earth, lest the very relationship should contaminate them. Were I in your place, I should deliver that monster up to justice with less compunction than ever I killed a venomous serpent. I should do it to save my children from the fatal infection of his presence and example. I should consider my mother-duty the most sacred on earth. Oh! it is a lamentable weakness in any woman to shield a worthless and depraved man, at the risk of perpetuating an evil example to her innocent children. And, Mrs. Russel, I think that I shall be doing you and them a good service in bringing this incorrigible villain to justice," said this severe young Nemesis, who was beginning to lose patience at the maudlin weakness of the flesh betrayed by poor Ruth Russel.

"Ah! but you don't know. You haven't been tried in such a way. Besides, if ever you were to talk with him, you would not think so ill of him," said the meek little woman.

"I am very sorry for you. I do not willingly wound you, only I would be glad to see you with a clearer moral vision, and a greater moral strength," replied Laura, gently.

"I do not complain. And now, Miss Elmer, you will at least breakfast before you go."

"Yes; thank you."

"And when shall I order a cab?"

"Immediately after breakfast, if you please, Mrs. Russel."

The landlady left the room to fulfil these directions, and immediately after breakfast Miss Elmer went out in a cab to procure new lodgings. Her circumstances did not permit her to be fastidious. She secured the most respectable lodgings to be found nearest to Newgate, and into them she removed in the course of the same forenoon.

She sent her new address to Doctor Clark, with a request that he would call upon her at his earliest convenience.

And the good doctor, astonished at the change of quarters, for which he could not account, called on her in the afternoon.

He found Miss Elmer busily writing at the centre-table of her gloomy new parlor. She arose to meet him, saying:

"This is very, very kind, Doctor Clark. You find me making minutes of a chain of evidence, or rather of probabilities which I wish to submit to you. I feel convinced that I have got the clue to the real murderer of Sir Vincent."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the doctor, in amazement, "let me hear!"

Miss Elmer commenced and related all the circumstances of her fragmentary acquaintance with Sir Vincent Lester's *protégée*, Helen Ravenscroft; the mysterious stranger that waylaid and followed her carriage; the midnight interview, and angry words that passed between this stranger and the baronet upon the occasion when she accidentally discovered them together; and finally, the conversation that had recently passed between herself and poor Ruth Russel, in which she was enabled to put certain disjointed incidents together, and identify the mysterious "light-haired man" with a certain notorious criminal who had fled from justice years before.

"Now deep in my heart is the conviction that this man and no other was the assassin of this unfortunate baronet," concluded Laura.

"Good heaven! and yet you do not know the circumstance that makes that the most probable thing in the world?" exclaimed the doctor.

Laura looked up, full of interest.

"That criminal fled from trial, and Sir Vincent Lester was the principal witness against him; indeed, without the testimony of Sir Vincent Lester, I doubt if it would have been possible to convict him," said the doctor.

"And there is the motive established at once for the assassination!" exclaimed Laura, with increasing excitement.

"Yes, the very strongest motive that can possibly actuate human nature—that of self-preservation."

"Oh, then, let us go at once to some magistrate and lodge this information, procure a warrant for the arrest of this man, and, if possible, an order for the liberation of Mr. Cassinove."

The doctor smiled compassionately, saying—

"Ladies know but little of the formulas of law, my dear Miss Elmer, else you would be aware that though we may procure a warrant for the arrest of this man, we cannot possibly procure the liberation of young Cassinove. Having been duly committed to prison to answer the charge of murder, he must remain a prisoner until his trial shall have ended in his acquittal or——"

The doctor left the other words unspoken.

"Oh! but that is very hard!" said Laura.

"It is; and I must remind you of another set of circumstances—namely, that the evidence against Ferdinand Cassinove, whom we believe to be innocent, is much stronger than that against the man whom we believe to be the assassin of Sir Vincent. Indeed, I doubt whether you have any evidence to give that would justify any magistrate in issuing a warrant for arresting the man upon the charge of having murdered Sir Vincent Lester. If a warrant should be issued for his arrest at all, it will probably be upon the old charge. But we can soon satisfy ourselves. We will repair at once to a magistrate and lodge the information we possess. I will wait while you put on your bonnet."

Laura Elmer did not keep the good doctor waiting five

minutes, but went into her adjoining chamber, and in a few seconds returned, shawled, bonnetted, and gloved for the expedition. The doctor handed her into his carriage, and they set out for Bow street.

Arrived there, they had to wait some time before the magistrate was at leisure to attend to them; and when at length he was disengaged, the doctor requested that the office might be cleared, as the information he had to give had best be given in private. The character and position of Doctor Clark insured a prompt attention to his request. When the office was cleared of all except the magistrate, his clerk, the doctor, and Miss Elmer, the latter advanced, and being sworn, made her statement. Now every thing, even remotely connected with the tragedy of Lester House, was of the utmost interest to the authorities. Miss Elmer's statement received a candid and attentive hearing, and the magistrate thought the information of sufficient importance to justify him in issuing a warrant for the apprehension of the accused.

Miss Elmer and Doctor Clark had the satisfaction of seeing this warrant placed in the hands of an experienced officer before leaving the magistrate's office.

From Bow street they repaired to Newgate to comfort the prisoner there with the intelligence of the clue they had obtained to the real assassin.

Meantime, the officer with the warrant sought the accused first of all at the cottage of his wife in Chelsea; but Ruth Russel and her children had flitted with all their luggage, nor could any one tell whither they had gone.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE DUCHESS OF BERESLEIGH AT HOME.

Festal joy

Laughs in the mantling goblet, and the night,
Illumed by the splendid, dazzling light,
Rivals departed day.—*Brown.*

FROM gloom to glare ; from the prisoner's cell at Newgate to the drawing-room at Beresleigh House.

Beresleigh House was one blaze of light. Crowds of carriages blocked up the way for some distance up and down the street before the front of the house. The occasion was this :—The young Duke and Duchess of Beresleigh had returned from their bridal tour, and were receiving their “ dear five hundred friends ” at home.

The drawing-rooms, superbly furnished, beautifully adorned, and brilliantly lighted, were filled with the beauty, fashion, and celebrity of society.

At one end the young duchess, the beautiful and happy bride, stood to receive her guests ; the loveliest where many were lovely.

Her dress was arranged with her usual artistic taste. It consisted of a full lace robe, light as a gossamer, worn over rose-colored silk, delicate blush roses in her hair, and pearl ornaments on her neck and arms. Never had Rose been happier than upon this evening, though even now she was not perfectly happy. We are never any of us so at any moment of our lives. The brightest sunshine casts the darkest shadows. The shadow of Rose's light was the thought of Ferdinand Cassinove pining in his prison cell, and of Laura Elmer sorrowing in her gloomy lodgings. But the heart of Rose was full of hope ; she had great confidence in the innocence of Cassinove, and great faith in Providence ; she was doing, and she meant to do, all in her power to serve Cassinove ; and she had in her own heart not a single doubt either of the perfect rectitude of young Cassinove, or of his final

acquittal and full exoneration from suspicion. Therefore she put away all pensiveness; turned her back upon the shadow and faced the sunshine; dispensed her smiles with equal sincerity and affability; and even, at length, joined the dance. It was while she was still dancing that she noticed her own especial footman lingering near the door, as if anxious, yet afraid, to enter.

Seeing this, and surmising that he might be the bearer of some note from Laura Elmer, she took the earliest opportunity, when the dance was over, to move near the door, and beckon the man to her side.

He came in, and drawing near, said—

“I beg pardon, your grace, but there is a person below who is very urgent to see you upon the most important business.”

“A person. What sort of a person, Miller?”

“A gentlemanly individual, your grace.”

“And what is his business?”

“He says he can communicate it to no one but your grace in person.”

“Oh, it is probably one of the Hastings! You know, Colonel and Mr. Hastings, Miller? If the visitor be either of those gentlemen, say that I decline to receive him.”

“Your grace, it is neither Colonel nor Mr. Hastings. It is a perfect stranger, whom I never saw at the house before. He is very urgent to see your grace, indeed.”

“Well, show him into the library, Miller, and say that I will see him there in a few minutes. And do you yourself be there in attendance.”

“Yes, your grace,” said the servant, bowing and retiring.

And the young duchess, more than ever convinced that the “gentlemanly individual” below must be a messenger from Laura Elmer, prepared to give him audience.

She crossed the room to the place where the dowager Duchess of Beresleigh, glowing in crimson velvet, sparkling in diamonds, and nodding in white ostrich-plumes, stood the admiring and admired centre of a circle of literary and political lions, artists, authors, orators, actors. No celebrity in any order of art, science, or literature, ever came amiss to her most gracious grace.

Rose floated gracefully to her side, saying—

“Mamma” (as the motherless young creature delighted to call her beloved mother-in-law), “mamma, there is a person in the library waiting to see me; I think, I am almost sure, that he comes from Mr. Cassinove or Miss Elmer.”

“Ah! poor, unhappy Miss Elmer! I wish she were here to-night! Why are people of genius always so unhappy?” exclaimed the duchess.

“I do not know,” said Rose, simply; “but, mamma, I suppose I may withdraw from the room for a while, and see this person without impropriety.”

“Assuredly, my love; see him by all means. Ah, poor Miss Elmer,” sighed the dowager, sincerely, as she turned again towards her circle, “she is one of the noblest among women, my dear Lady Morgan! one of the natural queens of society, Mr. Kemble! But she has had terrible vicissitudes. However, you all know her story; it was made public in the celebrated Swinburne case, decided a year ago by the House of Lords, which gave me the sweetest little daughter-in-law in the world.”

Thus the Duchess dowager talked to her friends.

Meanwhile Rose floated gracefully away on her errand of benevolence.

She entered the library, which was lighted but by one chandelier hanging from the ceiling over the central table. At this table stood a rather “shabby-genteel” looking man, with his back turned, and his hands in his pockets.

Rose, kindly wishing to put this impoverished-looking gentleman at his ease, advanced towards him, speaking pleasantly, and saying—

“You have come to me from Miss Elmer or Mr. Cassinove? Pray take a seat, sir.”

“No, madam, I have not come from Mr. Cassinove or Miss Elmer,” said the visitor, in a singularly sweet and clear voice, as he turned around and bowed deeply to the young duchess.

Rose then saw before her a fine-looking man, with a tall and graceful figure, a stately head, well covered with glossy, light yellow hair, that waved around a forehead broad, white,

and open as that of boyhood; delicately-arched eyebrows, clear, gentle, blue eyes, straight nose, full, finely-curved lips, all blended into a charming expression of kindness and gay good-humor.

As the young duchess looked up at this face smiling sweetly down upon hers, her own countenance went through many rapid changes; first a vague surprise, then a fearful suspicion, lastly a horrified recognition, as, with that cry of anguish we all utter in our extremity—

“*Oh, my God!*”

She threw her hands up to her face, reeled back, and sank upon the sofa. The visitor deliberately crossed the room, folded his arms across his broad chest, and standing before her, said—

“My sudden appearance has startled you, madam the duchess! Your grace scarcely expected to see me here!”

There are shocks so great that they *kill* the weak and *stun* the strong into a state resembling calmness. This was such an one to the young duchess. It did not *crush*—it *calmed* her. Though pale as death, she quietly motioned her strange visitor to a seat, and when he had taken it, said—

“In the name of heaven, have you returned from the grave to ruin me?”

“No, mine own; I have returned only from the *Continent*. I am no ghost, but solid flesh and blood, as I can soon convince you,” said the visitor, gayly, rising and holding out his arms, as if to embrace her.

“Stop! no nearer, on your life and soul!” said Rose, speaking in a deep, stern voice, that sounded strangely and fearfully from those bloodless lips, and extending her hand in a forbidding gesture.

He sank back in his chair, regarding her with wonder and curiosity.

“In the name of heaven, I adjure you to tell me—why did you give out a report of your own death? why have you assented yourself so many years? and why have you returned now?”

“Ha! ha! ha!” laughed the stranger, throwing himself

back in his chair, "this is a pretty reception to give me, after a four years' absence."

"Once more I adjure you, by the righteous Judge of quick and dead, tell me why you have practised this long and fatal deception?"

"Sweet partner of all my joys and sorrows, I do not know that I have any right to keep the secret from you. I will tell you, then. I fled, as you know, from a criminal charge of a monstrous nature, and of which it would have been very difficult to prove my innocence. I ingeniously spread the report of my own death to stop pursuit, and obtain—oblivion. After four years' absence, when I supposed myself to be forgotten, I returned to England—can you not guess why?—to see my beloved Rose. And where do you suppose I first saw her?" asked the stranger, pausing and looking fixedly in the pallid face of the young duchess.

"Go on," were the only words that escaped her bloodless lips.

"I found her at midnight on Hounslow Heath, in the hands of footpads."

"You were——." Rose gasped and stopped.

"I *was* the companion of the man calling himself Colonel McCarthy in your pretended rescue."

"Then, if you recognized me there, why did you not make yourself known to me? It would have prevented all this utter ruin."

"Because it did not suit my circumstances to do so. My return to England was an experiment. It remained yet to be tried whither I should be remembered and pursued. Besides, as soon as I recognized in our intended victim, my own Rose, I wished to deliver you from the power of my colleague, McCarthy, a purpose that I could only effect by the utmost secrecy and caution."

"Explain yourself."

"You must have already surmised that the whole affair of the attack on your carriage, your rescue by Colonel McCarthy and myself, and your refuge of Howlet's Close, was all a preconcerted arrangement, planned by McCarthy,

alias McSomebodyelse, to throw you into the power of a certain illustrious personage whose name was not to be mentioned in the affair; and who, I suppose, really never authorized it."

"Oh, heaven, what a pandemonium is this town! what demons are in it!" muttered Rose, in horror.

"Very true, my love; but you are unwise to disturb yourself about them. To resume. You were taken to the country-house miscalled Howlet's Close. You were shown to your chamber, but fortunately did not retire to bed. A man in a mask came out from his concealment in a dark closet; his purpose was honest, and though he unwillingly gave you a desperate fright, he bore you away from a house of danger, and he would have borne you to one of safety, had not your own outcries and the untimely arrival of the Duke of Beresleigh prevented his laudable purpose, and made it necessary for him to beat a speedy retreat. You have already recognized in your deliverer from that house of danger—myself!"

"Go on! Why did you not claim me then and there, before I rushed, dragging down all I love, to this horrible pit of perdition?" exclaimed Rose, in despair.

"Because, my love, as I repeat, my circumstances did not permit me to do so. I dared not alienate my friend at court by letting him know that I had freed the bird I had engaged to help him to entrap. And I dared not let the authorities know of my return to England. I was forced to use caution and secrecy in all that I did. You were delivered from my honest custody by the hands of the Duke of Beresleigh. And the next news I heard of you was the announcement of your betrothal to his grace."

"Oh, man! man! why did you not *then*, at least come forward and prevent the consummation of such a horrible misfortune?"

"Because, my dear, the principle of self-sacrifice was never a considerable element in my character. The necessity of secrecy and caution had increased tenfold. It was while laying *perdue* after that night's adventure, I ascertained beyond all doubt that I *had* been recognized, and that the police *were*

in search of me. You see I durst not discover myself to one even so dear as you."

"Then, in the name of Heaven, why do you appear to blast me with your presence now?" cried Rose, in horror.

"Because the necessity of concealment no longer exists. Because my enemy—my prosecutor—no longer lives; he is dead—dead and d—d!" exclaimed the stranger, in a tone of intense hatred, as a demoniac glare flashed like lurid lightning athwart the calmness of his countenance. "And because," he added, emphatically, "*I want you for myself.*"

The young duchess, shuddering, hid her face in both her hands, without replying.

"Come, Rose," he continued, with his usual composure, "if you did not owe me fidelity and affection, you do owe me at least some gratitude for my deliverance of you from a house that you could scarcely have left without my aid. Even his grace the duke could not have discovered your retreat, or rescued you from that well-chosen hiding-place. Come, Rose, you have given me a very cold reception; but when I assure you that I am willing to forgive this escapade of yours with the duke, and provide for your flight with me to the Continent—if you will consent to be mine——"

"Wretch! cease your insults. I will hear no more!" cried Rose, shivering with disgust.

"Come, Rose, this is carrying matters with rather too high a hand. You *know* that you are in my power—soul and body you are mine."

"No, by the blue heavens above us! not so fallen as that. I am not yours, thank God!"

"What! do you forget the little transaction at the village church at Swinburne four years ago? By that I claim you as my own."

"I forget nothing; least of all a later fact that I should ever remember, namely, that I am the most unworthy wife of one as high above you as heaven is above Hades—so high above you that he should not even be named in your presence. To him, my noble husband, will I go—to him will I confess all, as I should have done before our marriage would he have consented to hear me—he only, my husband, shall be my

judge. I will commit my cause to him, and receive my fate from his own just hands. And, whatever that fate may be, I shall know it to be righteous, coming from him; and, whatever it may be, though the Duke of Beresleigh may banish this poor Rose forever from his sight—look you, sir! you, at least, I will never see again. The monstrous and unnatural crime that has made you hateful to all mankind has made you loathsome to me.”

“Madam, you will sing another song, or ever the play is over.”

“Your threats are vain! Do not misjudge me by the strong agitation into which your first unexpected appearance threw me! Like an apparition from the grave, you startled me from my self-possession and judgment. Your diabolical proposal that I should fly with you to the Continent restored me to myself; showed me that, in suffering your presence and conversation, I was doing a great wrong. And now, sir, I command you to leave the house,” said the young duchess, gaining courage at the sound of her own brave words.

“Oh, you believe yourself Duchess of Beresleigh, no doubt; but *I* live to bar your claim to that proud title.”

“I may not wear the title to the Duchess of Beresleigh for another day, but I am still the Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne, and, as such, I shall employ all my wealth and power to rid society of a monster unfit to infest it! And now, sir, I order you to leave this house; for if you desecrate this place with your presence one moment longer, I shall send for a policeman, and you shall spend this night in custody, whatever to-morrow may bring forth,” said the duchess, rising and laying her hand upon the bell-cord.

He sprang forward, and with a look, half entreaty, half command, arrested her hand, exclaiming:

“Rose, you are mad! mad! Pause, and reflect, before you pull down irretrievable ruin upon your own young head! Listen, calmly, while I place before you two courses of action, with their certain consequences. You say that you will go to the duke and tell him all! You will tell the naughtiest peer in England of the dark blot you have brought upon his escutcheon. Do you imagine that he will show

you any mercy? I tell you, men, whether peers or peasants, never forgive such wrongs! He will repulse you with loathing and abhorrence, and leave you to your fate! You will be subjected to a degrading criminal trial, that must end in certain conviction, and all its horrible consequences—too horrible to think upon! Can you, so young and fair, and so beloved and worshipped, bear a doom so dark with anguish and with ignominy!”

Her face grew white and sharp with woe, and then with that look still upon it, seemed to turn to marble. Not the sculptured front of Nemesis could be whiter, stiller, sterner, than her young brow, as she replied:

“It may be as you say. I may sink into this black pit that yawns to receive me; yet if my path of duty leads thither, I will not swerve to the right or to the left, but walk straight to it as ever a martyr walked to the stake. I will tell my husband all, and he shall be my judge.”

“You are frantic! frantic, I say, Rose! Yet if you have a single ray of reason left, listen while I tell you the brighter results of an opposite course of conduct. Consent to fly with me to the continent. You can quietly collect your money and jewels to-night, steal from the house, and meet me at the corner of the square at three o’clock in the morning. I will have a carriage in waiting; we will drive to the office and take the early coach to Dover, meet the evening boat to Calais, and proceed to Paris. By so doing you will escape the criminal trial, with all its horrible consequences. You will have lost only your rank and title as Duchess of Beresleigh, which you must lose in any case, but you will retain your rank and title of Baroness Etheridge, together with the vast revenues of Swinburne. Upon this we can live abroad in elegance and luxury. And I shall be the most exemplary husband that ever devoted himself to a wife’s happiness, and thus——”

“Monstrous caitiff!” she exclaimed, “how dare you utter such words in my presence? Were there no question of honor, duty and self-respect at issue, I still would die here rather than seek safety with such as you! The discovery, the public exposure, the criminal trial, with all its terrible

consequences, would be welcome, rather than the deeper degradation you offer as a refuge !”

“ You take high ground, madam ; but this one warning I would give your grace : Unless I hear from you to a different purpose to-morrow before noon, you, Rosamond Wardour and Etheridge, Duchess of Beresleigh, and Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne—shall stand before the world a committed felon !”

For all the answer the young duchess rang the bell.

The footman in waiting on the outside of the door immediately entered.

“ Miller ! show this person to the street door, and if he does not go promptly and quietly, summon a policeman,” said the young duchess.

“ Your grace shall hear from me before twelve to-morrow !” exclaimed the stranger, crimson with rage, as he followed the footman from the room.

Left alone in the library, Rose sank upon the sofa, and covering her face with her hands, groaned—

“ Oh, merciful Saviour of the world, that I could die this moment ! that I could die this moment. But one short hour ago, so exalted, so confident, and so happy ! and now so wretched, so fallen, and so lost ! And, oh, Heaven ! how shall I tell the duke ! What shall I say to my husband ?”

The re-entrance of the footman who had attended the stranger to the street door, startled her.

“ Well, Miller ?” she asked, looking up.

“ Please, your grace, the man has gone away quite peaceably,” said the footman.

“ Very well. Then go to the duke and say, with my respects, that I request the favor of his presence here in the library,” said the duchess.

The footman bowed and withdrew to do his errand.

And the young duchess, pale, breathless, trembling, almost lying, awaited the entrance of the duke.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE WIFE'S CONFESSION.

And now, my gracious lord, prepare to hear
A story that shall turn thee into stone!
Could there be hewn a monstrous gap in nature—
A flaw made through the centre by some god,
Through which the groans of ghosts might strike thy ear,
They would not wound thee as this story will.—*Lee.*

THE Duke of Beresleigh entered the library with a brisk step, humming a lively opera tune—the exuberant joy of his heart overflowing in this manner.

“Well, fairest and rosiest of Roses, what are your grace’s commands? You have absented yourself long from our friends; there are many inquiries for you. Your untimely visitor has departed, I presume,” he said, gayly approaching her.

She turned towards him with a face white and still as death.

“Rose! good Heaven, Rose! what is the matter? What has happened?” he cried, springing towards her. She held out her hand with an adjuring gesture that suddenly arrested his steps. He stood still, gazing at her in astonishment for a moment, and then said—

“Oh, I see how it is! This messenger, who I am led to suppose comes from Miss Elmer or Cassinove, brings some distressing news of your young friend or the unhappy prisoner! My sweet Rose, you are much too sensitive to be exposed to the necessity of listening to these heart-rending tales of distress. I really must interdict it! Come, tell me what it is, my dearest love, and let me know how I can alleviate the sorrows that touch your gentle heart as if they were your own,” he said, again drawing near to her.

But again she raised her white hand to wave him back, as, in a voice so hollow that he never could have recognized it as her own, she said—

“Do not touch me, Duke of Beresleigh! A gulf has

opened between us deeper and broader than that which divides heaven and Hades !

"In the name of heaven, Rose, what do you mean?" he exclaimed, appalled at her manner.

"I will tell you presently," she replied, in the same hollow voice, adding, "you said that your friends above-stairs were inquiring for me?"

"Yes, dear love."

"Will you please to return to the drawing-room and say to my—your mother—that I am too much indisposed to be visible again to-night, and beg her to make my excuses, and to fill my place among my—her guests?" requested Rose, speaking in an unearthly tone, and with an incoherent manner.

"Certainly, my fairest Rose!" said the duke, with a bewildered look, but affectionate earnestness.

"And then will you please return to me here?"

"Most assuredly, sweet love!" he said, drawing near to embrace her.

"Away! away! you must not touch me; there is contagion in my contact!" she cried, wildly.

"Rose!" he exclaimed, in the utmost astonishment.

"Oh, go and do as I have asked you! Go, do as you have promised me—and then come back! For, oh! I have such a story to tell you! I have such a story to tell you!" she cried, distractedly.

He hesitated, looked at her in alarm, and made one step towards her; but her blanched face, her strained eyes, and outstretched hand, sternly repelled him; and full of astonishment and consternation, he turned to obey her, saying:

"I go, Rose, but shall return in two minutes to hear the explanation of this strange conduct."

"One word before you go! Do not alarm the duchess, or permit her to come to me. I could not bear it; I must see you alone," she pleaded.

"Certainly, dear Rose; compose yourself; try to be calm. This is most extraordinary," said the duke, as he went up-stairs.

He found the room still full; the company had not even begun to thin. He found his mother still surrounded by her friends, and shining like a planet in the centre of its satellites

He went up to her, and said, in a low voice :

“Madam, the duchess is indisposed, and feels compelled to retire. She begs that you will make her excuses, and fill her place to our friends.”

“Ah ! I am sorry to hear Rose is not well ! but I understand it all. She has been agitated by some news of Miss Elmer or Mr. Cassinove, brought by this messenger to-night. She is full of benevolence and sympathy, and it is quite right that she should be touched with the misfortunes of her friends ; but really, when their troubles disturb her so seriously as to make her ill, they should be kept from her, else no one knows what the consequences may be. Is she very much indisposed ?” inquired the duchess dowager.

“Indeed, madam, I have never seen her so pale and so nervous.”

“I had better go to her ; I am sure our friends would excuse my absence for a few moments,” said the duchess, in alarm.

“No, madam, I entreat you will not. Rose will retire, and if she should really be so ill as to require the presence of your grace, I will surely let you know.”

“Be sure that you do, then,” said the duchess.

And with a bow the young duke withdrew.

The duke returned to the library. He found his young wife sitting where he had left her, still and white, upon the corner of the sofa.

“Well, my sweet Rose, I have done your bidding, and now I have come to hear what it is that has so dreadfully agitated you,” he said, taking a seat near her sofa.

She looked at him with a gaze full of woe, and remained silent.

“Is it any thing connected with your friends, Miss Elmer or Mr. Cassinove ? any news brought by their messenger ?”

“No, no, you are utterly mistaken. That man was no messenger from the one or the other ; that man——”

Rose paused, and her cheek grew whiter than before.

“Well, that man ! who and what was he ? and how durst he come here to agitate you in this manner ?” said the duke, impatiently.

"That man—oh, heaven! how dare I tell you! Oh, George! oh, Beresleigh, Beresleigh! did I not say to you three months ago that you knew not upon whose brow you were to place the ducal coronet of your ancient house—did I not? did I not?"

"Yes, Rose, yes; but what mean you, in the name of heaven?"

"Did I not say to you that I felt, deep in my heart, that this life of mine was but a transient glory?"

"Yes, Rose, yes. Whither do your words tend?"

"Did I not warn you that I was but a poor little player-peeress, who must sustain her part for a season, until the comedy should be over, and then go away and be forgotten?"

"Yes, yes; *what* do you mean?"

"Did I not tell you that Fate would exact a terrible payment for this pageantry with which she has amused me. Said I not that I felt my strange destiny akin to that of poor Jane Dudley, who, for ten glorious days, played her great part of Queen of England, and then laid down her young life in payment for that brief, bright pageantry?"

"Yes, yes, you did; but, in the name of heaven, explain yourself! What do you mean, Rose?"

"Oh, Beresleigh, Beresleigh! I mean that my second-sight is realized; my prophecy is fulfilled; my doom at hand!" she said, wildly.

"I think I understand you, Rose. This visitor who has disturbed you so much to-night is, I presume, the pretended heir of Swinburne, with whose imaginary claims the worthy Colonel Hastings sought to frighten you into a marriage with his admirable son, and having failed in that project, seeks now to disturb your peace. Very well, I shall hand them all over to the police to-morrow morning," said the duke, indignantly.

"Alas! alas! you are far, far wrong! If it were only a new claimant of the barony of Swinburne I should not mind it much; it would be what I always expected. But oh! when I felt that my prosperity was but a passing pageant—when I felt that I should be cast down from wealth and splendor to poverty and obscurity—I thought *that* would be

the worst ! the very worst ! I did not expect dishonor, degradation, danger to liberty and life !” she cried, distractedly, wringing her pale hands.

“Great heaven, Rose ! what do you mean ?” questioned the duke, in the extremity of consternation and perplexity.

For all answer she arose and sunk at his feet, clasped his knees, sobbing aloud.

“Rise ! rise ! rise ! for heaven’s sake, rise.”

“No ! no ! no ! no ! here at your feet will I make my confession !” she sobbed in agony.

“*Confession*, Rose ?” he repeated, in alarm.

“Yes, confession ! Oh, Beresleigh, Beresleigh, do you not know that on the day we were betrothed I warned you that there were three secrets of my life with which you should be made acquainted before contracting yourself to me ?”

“Yes !” exclaimed the young duke, breathlessly.

“The first secret, that related to my sure presentiment of a coming reverse, and the second secret, that concerned my acquaintance with Albert Hastings, were both fully confided to you ; but the *third* secret ! Oh, Beresleigh ! the third secret was the most terrible of them all.”

“Well ?” gasped the duke, in breathless agitation.

“I wished to tell you that third fatal secret, but you would not listen to me !”

“Well !” aspirated the duke, in a suffocated voice.

“Oh, that you had heard that—heard that secret ! Oh, that you had heard it before committing yourself irrevocably !”

“Speak plainly, I adjure you, girl ! Do not stretch me upon the rack !” exclaimed the duke, sternly.

“Ah, do not be angry with me ! do not be angry with me ! I will submit to any thing you please, so you will not be angry with me ! I can bear every thing else in the world but that ! and I may have to bear a horrible series of misfortunes ! but not your anger ! Oh, Beresleigh, not that ! it would kill me ! it would kill me !” she cried, convulsively, clasping his knees, hiding her face upon them, and shuddering through all her fragile frame.

He gently disengaged her hold, forced her to rise, and sit beside him. while he said mildly—

"Dear Rose, I am not angry with you! Why should I be? But you torture me more than you know! Your wild manner—your distracted talk—what am I to judge from it? What is it that you have concealed from me? Come, speak, beloved! You have nothing to fear from me. *I could not be angry with you. Come!*"

And he would have embraced her, but she shrank from him exclaiming—

"No, do not caress me! do not! and if you do not hate me after you hear all, I shall be grateful—only too grateful."

"Speak, Rose! conceal nothing from me."

"Oh! I did not wish to hide any thing from you, and I never, never wished to deceive you! I should have insisted on telling you that fatal secret which you refused to hear, only that I believed the man to have been dead for years!"

"Rose! the man! *what man!*" cried the duke, in the low voice of intense anxiety.

"The man who was here to-night!" gasped Rose.

"And what was that man to you—to you, my wife, the Duchess of Beresleigh?" asked the duke, haughtily.

"Oh, cast me from you, if you will! Leave me to my dreadful fate! but do not speak angrily to me! from you I cannot bear it!" cried Rose, in despair.

"What, then, was that man to you?"

There was a dreadful pause.

Rose, white, shuddering, with her features drawn sharp with agony, seemed upon the verge of death. So great was her anguish, that, as the duke gazed upon her, pity for one whom he had loved so much overcame all other emotions, and modulating his voice to the gentlest tone, he said—

"Rose, open your heart to me without fear, and believe me when I assure you, that whatever your fatal secret may be, I will not be harsh with you; and however I may be compelled to act, all shall be done in the spirit of kindness towards you. Your happiness and welfare shall be the first consideration, after the claims of honor and duty. And now, Rose, tell me, is it as your dreadful anguish leads me to suspect, was this—this man—a former lover of yours?"

"Yes, yes; and I never told you. Oh, do not curse me, though I deserve it!" she gasped.

Though he had been half prepared to hear this admission, yet the words pierced his heart like a sword. It was by his great self-control he restrained his emotions.

She continued—

“He was more than a lover, and yet not so much. Oh, bear with me! hear me patiently to the end!”

“Speak on.”

But so great was her anguish that she was incapable of speaking or breathing freely.

There was a waiter with decanters of port and sherry and glasses sitting on the table. The duke poured out, and brought a glass of wine, which he forced her to drink. The stimulant had the desired effect. She breathed freely, and commenced her narrative—

“It was when I was but seventeen years old, and while I still believed myself to be the daughter of Magdalene Elmer, the village-laundress, that the event I am about to relate to you occurred.

“My poor foster-mother, doubtless to assuage the pangs of remorse, always made my life as easy to me as possible. She worked hard to keep me from work, and to pay for my education. She was as careful of my poor beauty as though I had been some little princess entrusted to her charge. That I should be brought up like a lady, and marry a gentleman of fortune, seemed her one great purpose in life. Doubtless she wished to compensate me in this way for the birthright of which her treachery had deprived me. She threw me as much as possible in the way of gentlemen, but always privately cautioned me never to permit the slightest freedom from one of them. She used to tell me that if I was discreet my beauty would make my fortune; but if I were otherwise, it would prove my destruction. And thus forewarned, if not forearmed, she would send me, as it were, to seek my fortune amid scenes of social danger. I mean that she was in the habit of getting up all the fine linen for the transient visitors at the Etheridge Arms, and of sending me to take it home.”

“Oh, Rose! poor, poor girl! how cruelly you were exposed!” said the duke.

“It was the only service that my poor foster-mother

requested of me; and, indeed I always remembered her caution, and deported myself in such a manner as to repel impertinence."

"I was scarcely seventeen years old, and we were living in an obscure old house in an unfrequented wood a mile out of the village, when one morning, a traveller, in the dress and accoutrements of a sportsman, passed by our place. He looked at it, retraced his steps, and entered the gate. Mother and myself were both in the yard. I returned into the house, but my mother——"

"Your *foster*-mother, Rose," said the duke, with a fastidious shudder.

"My foster-mother, then, went forward to meet the stranger. From the open parlor-window I heard all that passed.

"His name, he said, was Captain Rutherford; he was an officer of the 10th Hussars; he was on leave, and had come down to the neighborhood for a few weeks shooting; he did not like the village, and was in search of country lodgings. Passing by, he had seen and had been pleased with the house, and would pay liberally for the accommodation if she could lodge him for a few weeks.

"Now, there were several suspicious circumstances connected with the appearance and story of this person which did not strike me at the time, but which I had bitter cause to remember afterwards. In the first place, Swinburne, with the exception of the chase, was not a sporting neighborhood. No one but the visitors at the castle ever came down to shoot or fish. In the second place, this was not the sporting season. But my poor foster-mother, no more than myself, noticed this discrepancy.

"Her one absorbing desire to find a wealthy husband for her poor Rose blinded her to every danger and all consequences, and decided her, I firmly believe, to receive this gentleman as a lodger. The bargain was soon struck. The stranger returned to the village for his portmanteau, and Mrs. Elmer came into the house to prepare the upper rooms for his reception.

"After her preparations were complete, she took me in

hand, dressed me carefully, but very plainly, and cautioned me to be very discreet. But this sort of setting me up for sale was so repugnant to my feelings that indeed I could have found it in my heart to have hidden myself in the wilderness."

"I can well believe it, my poor Rose," said the duke, with a tone and look as though he were mourning over her, dead.

She continued—

"Captain Rutherford came the same afternoon. I suppose he would have been considered by any landlady as a model lodger. He certainly tried to please *us* rather than himself, and he succeeded, so far as my foster-mother was concerned. Oh! it is a great mistake to think that men walk about the world with their characters written upon their faces! that a good man always looks benevolent, and a villain wears a sinister expression of countenance. We may inherit our face from one ancestor, and our character from another; or our faces may be given us by nature, while our characters are formed by education.

"Rutherford was a handsome and prepossessing man, tall, fair-skinned, fair-haired, with eyes as blue, clear, and gentle as those of childhood, and a smile full of frankness and benevolence. He fascinated my poor foster-mother;—she believed in him, honored him, indeed, loved him. His life with us was very quiet and regular. He went out in the morning with his dog and gun, and returned in the afternoon with nothing to show for his day's 'sport.' He often condescended to pass his evenings in chatting with my mother and myself.

"He often invited me to go for a walk, but I never would accept the invitation, nor, indeed, would my mother ever have permitted it. We never had any visitors, and so our lodger remained with us for several weeks in total seclusion."

Rose paused, a sudden blush suffused her pale cheeks, she drew a deep breath, recovered herself, and proceeded in a lower tone:

"Oh, how I hate to speak of what soon followed! Rutherford loved me, sought every opportunity to tell me so; but my foster-mother, discreet as she was ambitious, took care

that he was never for a moment alone with me. This course of conduct brought the man to the point towards which she had been drawing him all the time. He sought an interview with *her*; told her that he loved me, and wished to make me his wife. My poor mother! with ill-concealed triumph, she approved his suit, and sanctioned his addresses."

"And you, Rose, you?" exclaimed the duke, with the most painful interest.

"I *hated* the man! I say it now, and I said it then! but *then* I blamed myself for the instinctive hatred that seemed so unjust. I was a child in the hands of my foster-mother. She did not absolutely *force* me to accept Rutherford, but she urged me with tears, entreaties, and reproaches, and won her cause and Rutherford's through my love for her."

The young duke could not repress the deep groan that burst from his bosom.

"I consented to become the wife of Captain Rutherford. But after our engagement, my poor nurse insisted upon the same reserve as before. We were never left alone together for a moment.

"This course effected that which Mrs. Elmer had intended it should—the fixing of an early day for the wedding. The captain made liberal settlements, or brought us documents which he declared to be such. But he desired, upon account of his family, who, he said, wished him to marry an heiress, that the wedding should be a strictly private one, witnessed only by my mother. To this Mrs. Elmer consented, and the captain undertook all the necessary preparations. The curate and the parish clerk of Swinburne were heavily feed, and bound to secrecy.

"It was arranged that the captain, my mother and myself, should repair to Swinburne church at dawn, where the curate and the clerk would be in readiness to perform the ceremony, after which we were to take a post-chaise to Bristol, where we were to embark for the continent.

"Every thing was conducted as had been previously arranged. At dawn, the captain had a post-chaise before our door. We entered, and drove to the village, and entered the church before any of the villagers were astir. We found the curate and the clerk awaiting us.

"We were hurried up the aisle and formed before the altar. I noticed that Captain Rutherford looked agitated, and seemed anxious to have the ceremony over as quickly as possible. I wondered if he feared pursuit from his aristocratic friends, or if they really had the power to stop a man of twenty five from marrying whom he pleased; and I wished from my heart, if they had the power, they might appear and forbid the banns; for though I was not strong enough to resist my foster-mother's wish that I should wed this man, I should have rejoiced at any circumstance that would have broken off the marriage.

"The ceremony that was to bind me forever to this man commenced, and as it progressed, I felt as though my sentence of death was being pronounced; as if, with every response I made, I was letting go my last hold on life—my last hope of a reprieve.

"The ceremony was more than half over. The usual question was asked whether one there present saw any cause why these two persons should not be united in marriage, and if any one knew any such impediment, they were expected then and there to declare it, and the usual pause was made for the answer.

"‘The drowning catch at straws.’ I, whelmed in these waves of ruin, and feeling myself sinking, caught at the mad hope that some one, from some hidden nook, would answer and forbid the marriage, and save me from the pit of despair into which I felt myself falling.

"But no one spoke, and the ceremony proceeded. It was nearly over. Rutherford had placed the ring upon my finger, and was holding it there, and repeating after the curate the words of the ritual, ‘With this ring I thee wed; with all my worldly goods I thee endow,’ when a slight noise at the door caused him to look around. He started suddenly, dropped my hand, rushed to the nearest window, dashed it open, and threw himself out of it.

"At the very same instant, the church was filling with constables and the *posse comitatus* they had summoned to assist them. They were led on by a London police-officer, who had slowly traced the criminal down to our obscure village, and who carried in his hand a warrant for the arrest of——"

"Rutherford, of course."

"Thugsen, the criminal, at whose name all England shuddered! Thugsen, who had eluded the police, and hidden himself with us until he could secure his retreat to France! Thugsen, who, under the name of Rutherford, stood with me at the altar of the church at Swinburne.

"My poor foster-mother was struck with consternation at the danger I had so narrowly escaped. The clerk and the curate were both appalled. I, in the midst of my great horror, felt an awful thankfulness at my deliverance. The officers, as soon as they found he had fled from the church, dispersed in search of him, but he had managed to make his escape. Afterwards, I heard that he had fled to the continent; and long afterwards there was a confident report of his death. He was said, by all the newspapers, to have been killed in an *emeute* at Paris.

"I believed him dead until this night. This night he suddenly appeared before me. He dared to claim me as his own; dared to promise me forgiveness for what he called my inconstancy, if I would fly with him to the continent; dared, further, to threaten me with a criminal prosecution if I refused to accompany him."

"And you, Rose—what said you?"

"I said that I would refer my cause to you, and take my fate from your hands. And I do, oh, my husband! oh, my judge! my sovereign! I am yours to dispose of as you list. I know that what you decide will be right, perfectly right; and if you banish me from your side forever, I know that it will be because you are obliged by honor to do so, and that, even then, you will give poor, exiled Rose a kind good-bye!"

He did not at once answer her; he could not do so; he was terribly shaken. There was not a prouder or more sensitive man in England than himself. He felt keenly the deep dishonor of the charge that might be brought against the young Duchess of Beresleigh—the very connection of her name in any manner with that of the notorious Thugsen would be degradation. Yet he felt how innocent she really was. He looked at her sitting there so pale, so sorrowful, so resigned, and he opened his arms, saying—

"Rose, you are an honorable woman. Come to my bosom, my beloved wife; you are mine own, and my arm shall shield you against the world!"

And with a cry of irrepressible joy, Rose threw herself into his arms and swooned away.

He laid her gently on the sofa, and without venturing to call assistance, he applied such restoratives as were at hand, until his efforts were crowned with success, and with a deep sigh she recovered, and opened her eyes. Almost the first words of her returning consciousness were:

"Oh, what will your mother say?"

He knelt by her side, and speaking very gently, as he bent over her, said:

"Dear Rose, my mother and sisters need know nothing as yet. Remember that to-morrow they set out for Paris, on their way to the south of France. They will be travelling over the Continent all the autumn and winter; before they return, this threatened misfortune may be warded off. Compose yourself, dear Rose, and remember that you are my wedded wife, whom I will shelter and defend against the world."

And so, soothing, comforting, and sustaining the delicate creature, whom he had vowed before heaven to cherish until death, he led Rose to the door of her dressing-room, and gave her into the affectionate care of the little French dressing-maid. He went to his own room, and passed a night of silent agony.

Very early in the morning a message came from the duchess-dowager, to know how her beloved daughter-in-law had passed the night. Rose sent word that she was much better—in fact, quite well.

And, with a superhuman effort at self-command, she left her bed, and, after a careful morning-toilet, repaired to the breakfast-room, where, with a heavy heart, but a cheerful countenance, she met the family.

The duchess-dowager and her daughters were in their travelling-dresses.

"I am very glad that you are so much better this morning my dear. Indeed, if your indisposition had continued, we should have deferred our journey. I have given Beresleigh

a strict charge that you are not to be distressed by hearing of troubles you cannot alleviate," said the dowager, thinking only that her fair daughter-in-law had been agitated by a messenger from Laura Elmer, as she advanced and kissed her cheek.

"Oh, she will do quite well," said the duke, giving Rose his arm, and placing her at the table.

"You seem to think very lightly of the matter, Beresleigh, but I tell you I will not have her agitated. Rose, poor child, has no mother to take her part, and scold you if you fail to take care of her; but I do assure you, you shall not get off free, for that reason, for I shall most impartially perform the duties of mother-in-law to *you*, and make you very uncomfortable, if Rose is not cheerful," said the dowager, as they gathered around the table.

The travelling-carriages were at the door, and as soon as breakfast was over, the duchess and her daughters took leave, and departed.

"Thank heaven, they are gone! Oh, that I should have lived to see the day upon which I thank heaven my mother and sisters have left me!" thought the Duke of Beresleigh, as he watched the two carriages roll off and disappear, and then he turned into the breakfast-room, where Rose stood, pale and frightened.

"Well, love!" he said, going to her side.

"That dreadful man threatened I should hear from him before noon to-day. And the clock is on the stroke of twelve!" she said, trembling.

They were interrupted by a knock at the street-door.

Rose shuddered and clung to the Duke.

The next moment a stranger was announced. He was a civil officer, bearing a warrant for the arrest of Rosamond Wardour and Etheridge, Duchess of Beresleigh and Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE INDICTMENT OF THE YOUNG DUCHESS.

I have marked
A thousand blushing apparitions start
Into her face ; a thousand innocent shames
In angel whiteness bear away these blushes,
And in her eyes there hath appeared a fire
To burn the errors that those judges hold
Against her maiden truth.—*Shakspeare.*

HAPPILY, the Dowager Duchess of Beresleigh and the Ladies Wardour had quitted the kingdom before the fall of the thunderbolt upon their ancient and noble house.

More happily, the unaffected humility, the simple kindness, and the innocent gayety of the young duchess, had made as many sincere friends as her surpassing beauty, exalted rank, and distinguished success had made secret enemies ; and thus, though society was shocked to its foundation by the news of her arrest upon so grave a charge, yet she was not left without warm advocates among the most eminent men and women of the world. And most happily, Rose was as innocent as a child, not only of the crime imputed to her, but of every thought connected with such sin. With the most diabolical exaggeration of malignity on the part of her enemies, the indictment of bigamy had been preferred at the Old Bailey, where, amongst the lowest and worst criminals of Newgate, Rose shuddered at the thought of appearing.

Willingly would Rose have fled alone to some remote region, whence she never more might have been heard of, could she have borne away with her into the wilderness the sorrow of her husband, leaving him happy. But this could not be. Rose was greatly beloved, not only by her husband, but by many devoted friends who remained faithful to her in her deep distress, and like a child in her humility, gratitude and trust, she placed herself in their hands to be guided by their united counsels.

The proceedings instituted against her, and based upon so slight a foundation as an unfinished marriage ceremony,

might possibly have been quashed ; but the arrest and the charge having been made public, it was deemed, by the duke and his friends, essential to the fair fame of the young duchess, that she should be vindicated by an open trial, but not at the Old Bailey.

For though her legal right to the title of the Duchess of Beresleigh, and the honors and immunities belonging to the rank, was now questioned, yet, as the Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne, she had the right to claim a hearing before the highest tribunal in the realm.

It was therefore by the advice of her friends, and the express desire of her husband, that she exercised her right of peerage, demanded a trial by the House of Lords, and remained quietly in London to await the issue.

The trial was arranged to be commenced on the fourteenth of the ensuing May.

Meanwhile, the enviers, haters and maligners of the beautiful young duchess were busy with her name and fame. Her antecedents were brought up, with many exaggerations, distortions, and inventions. The particulars of the alleged first marriage were not known, but what was missing in fact was supplied by fancy. The blackest slanders were circulated, and in order to set the seal of truth upon the packet of falsehood, they said that the Duchess Dowager of Beresleigh and the Ladies Wardour had abandoned the young duchess, a circumstance, they argued, that looked very black for the latter.

This malignant perversion of the truth reached the ears of the young duke and duchess, through one of those pests of society, who, in the guise of friendship, take care to bring to the ears of the victim all the ill that is said of them in their absence.

These are Satan's own archers, who carefully collect all the scattered arrows of slander, adjust them to the bows, and point and send them directly home to the bosom for which they were intended, but which they never could have reached and wounded but for these same demon's bowmen.

The duke and duchess were sitting together in the drawing-room late in the evening, discussing this new calumny.

Rose was so deeply distressed, that the duke said :

"I shall take care in future, love, that none but tried and trusted friends shall gain admittance to you. I shall put a list of names in the hands of the porter, with instructions to deny you to all others."

"Oh, Beresleigh! Beresleigh!" said Rose, sobbing, "to think that even the kind forethought with which you favored your mother's and sister's long projected tour should now be turned against us. Ah, dearest! you see—you see what accumulating embarrassments you bring upon yourself by sustaining me. Ah, if you would only have permitted me to depart, I might have gone and buried myself in some distant land and been forgotten; and you in time might have been happy again. But now—but now—ah! if it were not a sin, an ounce of laudanum should soon end it all and relieve you of me."

"Hush, hush, my darling. All earthly troubles, however tremendous, are necessarily transient. Would you, then, rush from transient trouble to eternal misery?" inquired the duke, with a sweet gravity.

"Yes, yes; I would plunge my soul into eternal misery to save you from the earthly sorrow that I have brought upon you, if it were no sin against God!" cried Rose, with a wild burst of weeping.

"Rose, it is a great sin even to tamper with the thought of self-destruction. My own dear Rose, as yet you are innocent in thought, word, and deed. Upon this rock of innocence I have bid you take your stand, and let the waves of trouble rage around you as they may. You are safe so long as you keep your innocence. Remember and abide by the crest and motto of your ancient and unblemished house—the crest, a virgin proper on a rock in mid ocean, the waves beating around her; the motto, 'secure whilst upright.' In all heraldry there is not a more beautiful crest and motto. Hold to them, Rose!"

"Ah, but that I—that I should have brought a blot upon that pure escutcheon, and not upon that only, but on yours also. Oh, heaven! I knew—I knew that my short prosperity was too bright to last. I knew that I was but the mere pastime and mockery of Fortune. I knew that she would exact a terrible compensation for the brilliant comedy with which

she had amused me. I drew a parallel between myself and Lady Jane Dudley, who for ten days of glorious sovereignty paid the heavy penalty of her young life. I expected scarcely any thing less than that for the punishment of my own prosperity, and yet I looked for nothing so bad as this. I expected to be hurled down to poverty, obscurity, and solitude; but, alas! even my prophetic heart did not foresee the deep dishonor of a felonious charge and a public trial. My fate is heavier than that of my prototype, Jane Dudley."

"Hush, hush, my beloved! you are blameless; and blameless shall you be borne through the terrible ordeal!" said the duke, drawing her to his bosom.

They were interrupted by the sound of carriage-wheels stopped before the front-door.

"Who can it be at this time of the night? It is an odd hour for visitors to call," said the duke, impatiently.

Rose, frightened at the very idea of visitors, lifted her head from his bosom, and listened like a startled fawn.

Then followed the opening of the hall-door, and a little bustle of arrival, and in another minute the drawing-room door was thrown open, and a footman announced:

"Her grace the duchess and the young ladies."

And the duchess dowager and her train of fair daughters entered.

The duke started up in dismay, still clasping Rose to his bosom, as though to defend her against the whole world, his mother and sisters included. What could have brought them so suddenly to England just at this fearful crisis? How should they be told of the impending trial? And how could his proud mother and delicate sisters bear the news? Above all, how would they meet his "stricken deer," poor Rose?

These were the fearful questions that rushed, flash upon flash, like lightning through his mind, while Rose, clasped close to his heart, hid her face in his bosom.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE PRISON CELL.

The prison is in all things like the grave,
Where men no other privilege have
Than corpses ; nor so good. The soul once fled,
Lives freer so than when she was cloist'ed
In walls of flesh.
But the imprisoned soul, though living, dies
And at one time feels two captivities :—
A narrow dungeon, which her body holds ;
A narrower body, which herself enfolds.—*Bishop King.*

THE duchess dowager, with her hands stretched out, and her eyes full of tears, advanced towards her son and his wife, saying :

“ My dearest George ! my dear, dear Rose ! You could let me depart and remain abroad, while this great trouble was impending over you ! Oh, George, could you doubt your mother’s love ? Could *you*, Rose, doubt one who has tried to fill a mother’s place towards you ? Doubt no more ! If sorrow has come upon you, my children, your mother must bear it with you ! if dishonor, she must share it ! The hour of adversity and danger is not the time for a family to be separated. ‘ United we stand ; divided we fall ! ’ ”

She looked like a queen or a goddess, as she stood there in her noble rectitude.

The young duke released Rose, and with a burst of irrepressible emotion, turned and clasped his mother to his heart.

Rose, released from his embrace, sank at her mother’s feet, sobbing forth :

“ Oh, madam ! oh, lady ! I had rather died than have brought this sorrow upon you.”

The duchess stooped and raised her up, saying :

“ Come to my bosom, poor wounded dove, and believe that all the evils from which we cannot save you, we will share with you.”

“ And—the Ladies Wardour ? ” said the duke, turning a questioning glance towards them.

"They are my daughters and your sisters," said the duchess, significantly, while the young ladies, with tearful eyes and extended hands, came forward, and silently embraced their brother and sister-in-law. No miserable egotism, no mean question as to how the impending calamity might affect them and their prospects in life, had any place in the souls of these noble girls.

"But, oh ! is it possible !" said Rose, with her voice half-drowned in tears, "that hearing of my arrest upon such a dreadful charge, and knowing nothing of the particulars, you still had so much faith in me, that you could not believe me guilty?"

"No," said the duchess, emphatically, and almost indignantly. "I knew you too well, sweet Rose. And now dismiss forever from your mind the idea that *you* have brought this trouble upon us ! Providence visits us all with a trial in which *you* have the hardest part to bear, and *we* the duty of making it as light as possible," concluded her grace, tenderly pressing the hand of Rose.

And yet this noble matron did not the less deeply feel the dishonor with which her house was threatened, because she had the forbearance to refrain from complaints and reproaches, and the magnanimity to sustain her unhappy daughter-in-law.

When these greetings were over, the duke turned smilingly to his young wife, and said :

"A little while ago, dear Rose, I had occasion to refer you, for encouragement, to the crest and motto of your own old house—the virgin standing on the little sea-girt rock, with the words, '*Secure whilst upright!*' My mother has just adverted to our own crest and motto—a sheaf of wheat with the words, '*United we stand.*' With faith in two such mottoes, my Rose, we can face sorrows though they come, 'not single spies, but in battalions !' And now I am sure my dear mother wishes to change her travelling-dress before joining us at supper," concluded the duke, touching the bell.

The housekeeper appeared at the door, and the dowager and her daughters retired to their toilets.

"Oh ! is she not the noblest woman on the Lord's earth ?" exclaimed the duke, as his eyes followed, in fond admiration, the retiring form of his mother.

"Oh, yes, she is more than a queen—she is a goddess," answered Rose, fervently.

In an hour from that time the re-united family supped together cheerfully, as though no impending calamity lowered darkly over their heads.

That night, for the first time since her arrest, poor Rose retired to bed tranquillized. And the next morning all London knew that the duchess dowager, as soon as she heard in Paris of the arrest of her daughter-in-law upon a criminal charge, had hastened home to sustain her through the approaching trial that was arranged to be commenced on the fourteenth of May.

And to the unhappy Rose the presence and support of her husband's mother was an immense and almost incalculable advantage.

Human life is full of sorrows. But in the long catalogue of human woes there cannot be an anguish so intense, that so stretches the soul upon the rack, as the anxiety suffered by a woman, whose dearest friend is a helpless prisoner, charged with a heinous crime, and on trial for his life. On the one side is life, liberty, and vindicated character; on the other, the condemned cell, the ignominious death, and the dishonored grave.

And she powerless to help!

And there cannot be a despair so deep as that which follows the conviction and sentence. It is unmeasurable. Earth has no cure; has Heaven any comfort for it?

The prisoner is "cast for death." He is to die, but not the death of nature—that were a blessing to be prayed for; he is to be cut off from humanity, and cast forth from the earth as if unworthy of it; the thief and the courtesan may live, but not he; the beast and the reptile may breathe the fresh air, and enjoy the warm sunshine, but not he; he must be choked to death on a public platform, and smothered out of sight in a dishonored grave.

And oh! if she who loves him—outcast and rejected of men as he is, guilty as he may be—if she sustains the convict in the last awful hour of the condemned cell, in the last fateful moments preceding death, it is by a self-control in which she

has precipitated the whole strength of her soul and all her future life.

And if she survive the ghastly catastrophe, it is with palsied sensibilities—dull to all future suffering, dead to all enjoyment.

“Life for life.” The stern law kills the body of the shedder of blood, and kills the heart of his surviving wife or daughter.

I repeat, in all the woe of this world, there is no anxiety so intense as that which precedes a trial for life, and no despair so deep as that which follows the sentence of death.

Such an anxiety now held the soul of Laura Elmer in a state of tension to which a physical torture by the rack would have been as nothing. Such a despair loomed darkly before her. All the strong hopes that had supported her in the first days of Cassinove’s imprisonment had utterly given way and sunk beneath the weight of impending doom.

Darker and heavier lowered the shadow over the devoted head of the prisoner.

She had done all that was possible, and had failed of doing any good.

The warrant that she had caused to be issued for the arrest of Thugsen, *alias* Roberts, *alias* Rayburne, had been served upon him. Indeed, that mysterious individual, far from avoiding the officers of justice, had purposely thrown himself in their way, giving himself up, “to have the thing over once for all,” as he laughingly declared. He had been taken before the Bow street magistrate, by whom he had been very carefully examined; but in the absence of any positive evidence against him, he was discharged—a result that he had evidently foreseen from the first.

Laura Elmer’s latest hope went out with the discharge of this man, whom in heart she believed to be guilty of the murder for which Cassinove was about to be tried. She knew Cassinove to be guiltless, but she had no longer any faith in the necessary security of innocence. She could only remember how often the guiltless seemed fated to suffer, and shudder at the inscrutable mystery.

And as the day for the trial approached, without casting any new light upon the dark secret of the murder, her anxiety deepened to despair. Yet her anguish was confined to

her own bosom, or confided only to her venerable friend, Doctor Clark.

Into the dreary cell at Newgate she always carried a cheerful smile and hopeful words. She spent as much time as was permitted with the prisoner, going to him early in the morning, and taking with her a guitar, a book, or a bouquet of flowers, cheering the long, dull, prison hours with music, reading, or conversation—cheering, comforting, and strengthening the prisoner with all her might, through all the dreary day, and then at evening returning to her lonely lodgings, exhausted and despairing, to spend the night in weeping and in prayer.

Under this severe ordeal, health and life waned, and Laura Elmer, pale and wan, seemed but the spectre of her former self.

Hitherto Laura Elmer had endured the heaviest misfortunes with the greatest fortitude, for they had fallen only upon herself, but now, through the sufferings of another, she sounded the very depths of human anguish.

Her whole life was now devoted to the unhappy prisoner; her heart grew to him with a tenacity that still increased as the day that threatened to part them approached.

Her avocations were utterly neglected. Her small stock of money was exhausted; her rent was in arrears; her board was often bare; and Laura Elmer, once the heiress of millions, knew what it was to be dunned for debt and to suffer for food; but she felt not these troubles, they were "trifles light as air." Besides these, she suffered for the close imprisonment and deadly peril of one she loved more than life.

She had heard of the misfortune that threatened her friend Rose; but what was that compared to the tremendous calamity that impended over Cassinove? The young duchess had liberty and many friends; Cassinove was alone in the prison cell, with no one but herself to comfort him. And Laura would not deprive the prisoner of one hour of her company, to bestow it on the more favored duchess.

We have said that Laura Elmer confided all her secret anxieties to her friend, Doctor Clark.

One evening, after taking leave of Cassinove, and hearing the door locked upon him—a sound that always struck like a

death-knell upon her ear—she hurried home to her lodgings, and despatched a note to the venerable physician, entreating him to call on her at his earliest convenience.

The good doctor waited upon her the same evening.

He found her in those gloomy lodgings that she had taken in Skinner street for the sake of being near the prison.

She was sitting at the small round table in the centre of the sombre room, whose tall and narrow windows overlooked the gloomy neighborhood of St. Sepulchre. She sat clothed in the deep mourning that she had never laid aside since her mother's death, with her elbow resting upon the table, and her pale forehead bowed upon her hand, in an attitude of utter exhaustion.

The good doctor was shocked to notice the change that had passed over her queenly person in the few days that had elapsed since he had seen her last.

The emaciated figure, the pallid face, looking paler still in contrast to the large, dark eyes, and ebon locks, the look and attitude of mute despair, touched his heart.

"Miss Elmer," he said, in a gentle, paternal tone, advancing towards her.

"Doctor, this is very kind; sit down," she replied, rising, and placing a chair for him. "Doctor," she continued, as soon as he was seated, "I wished to speak to you particularly this evening——" she hesitated in embarrassment.

"Dear child, speak on; but try to take some hope and comfort to your heart."

"Hope? comfort? Ah, doctor, when suspense verges so near despair, is it not better to know and confront the worst at once? Methinks there would be the same relief in that as in death."

"Despair is sinful, my child. You and I believe young Cassinove to be guiltless. And believing him to be so, we must believe that he will be acquitted, which is equivalent to believing in the justice of God, which it were impiety to doubt."

"Doctor! doctor! I have no more confidence in the security of innocence—the guiltless are sometimes condemned, you know it! You know it!"

"No, I do *not* know it! What can I know of the guilt or innocence any human bosom concealed from all eyes but those of Heaven? But what I *do* know is that the Judge of all the earth is just, and that He will vindicate His justice, and save the guiltless. Laura Elmer, my child, if you would have a faith to sustain you under all the dark trials of life, you must resolutely shut your heart against every doubt; believe every thing that is inconsistent with your faith to be misrepresentation, illusion, error, and only God true and just. To bring the matter close home to you: You believe, in the face of the most overwhelming evidence, that Cassinove is innocent; carry your faith higher, and believe, in the face of all precedent and all probability, that God will vindicate that innocence because He is just! Get *that* faith, Laura Elmer! and amid all the storm of grief and sorrow, your soul will repose upon it as upon a rock that cannot be shaken."

"You speak like one of the patriarchs of old. I grow strong and hopeful while I listen to you," said Laura Elmer, earnestly.

"It is the power of the truth spoken, and not of the speaker," said the doctor, humbly. "And now, my child, you must take care of yourself. You must not neglect needful food and rest, and refreshing exercise in the open air."

"Doctor, it was not to talk of myself, but of Cassinove, that I requested you to come to me to-night. Have you seen him lately?"

"No, my child: I have not had an hour's leisure, except early in the morning or late in the evening, just before the prison doors are opened, or after they are closed. But to-morrow I will make the leisure, and surely see him."

"He is fearfully changed, doctor; you will be pained to see him; he has grown so thin and pale from his long and close confinement in that dreary prison. And he is so desolate, doctor; can any man be more desolate than he is? Think of it!—friendless, poor, and in prison, without father, mother, sister, or brother, without a friend in the wide world, save only me——" She hesitated, and her pale cheek flushed.

"But you are all to him—his guardian angel."

"I am his betrothed. I do all that I may for him, yet

not enough ; I cannot be all that I might be to him were I his sister—or his wife,” added Laura Elmer in a lower tone.

“ Well, my dear ?” said the doctor, seeing her hesitate.

“ Oh, doctor, that I were only his sister, or his wife, that I might have the privilege of being with him always, so that he might never more feel desolate and alone in his sorrow. Doctor, I cannot be his sister, but——” She hesitated, and again her pale cheek flushed.

“ You might be his wife,” said the doctor, finishing her sentence.

“ I *promised* to be so long ago. Doctor, if instead of coming into Newgate, Ferdinand Cassinove had come into an inheritance, the first use he would have made of his property would have been to ask me to share it with him. Doctor, have I not the same right to share his adversity ?” cried Laura, with a burst of tears.

“ My child, I know not what to say to you,” said the good physician, in painful perplexity.

“ Doctor, lay aside all conventional thoughts, come back to the first principles of justice and mercy, and listen to me. I, like Ferdinand Cassinove, am alone in the world ; I have no relatives whose pride might be wounded through me. The fate that made me friendless, left me free. I am the betrothed bride of Ferdinand Cassinove. I would redeem my pledge to him now in his captivity, even as he would have me redeem it in his prosperity, were he now free and fortunate. My heart craves with a yearning beyond measure for the lawful privilege of watching over him in his captivity, standing by him in his trial, comforting as I only of all on earth *can* comfort him—and oh ! if he should be condemned to die, sharing with him the ignominy, if I cannot share the death !” she concluded, with a burst of irrepressible weeping.

“ My child, my child, I understand you, but I know not how to answer you. I must have time to reflect. If I were the father of a family of daughters I might better know what to say to you, for I would speak to you as to my own child. But I am an old bachelor, with little knowledge of life beside the study and the sick-room. Yet I feel for you both with **all** my heart and soul. I will serve you to the very best of

my ability," said the good old man, with his eyes full of tears.

"Doctor, I know it, and I thank you from the depths of my heart. Doctor, listen to me farther. This privilege that I crave would be the greatest possible consolation to me, and—take notice, doctor—*the only possible chance of safety to Cassinove.*"

"The only chance of safety to Cassinove!" echoed Doctor Clark, in extreme surprise.

"Yes, doctor, his only chance of life rests in this relationship."

"My dear Miss Elmer, explain yourself."

"Listen, then. In the confusion and distress that immediately followed the discovery of the murder of Sir Vincent Lester, I was overlooked or forgotten. At least, I was not summoned as a witness before the coroner's inquest. There were, perhaps, witnesses in plenty without me, who testified directly to those fatal circumstances that were deemed quite sufficient to convict Cassinove. And I was glad to be left out. But now the continual gossip of the people and the press, concerning the tragedy at Lester House, brings my name more and more into the affair, and under the notice of the authorities. They hint at a cause of that murder, that makes my cheeks burn and my heart shudder. I live in the daily dread of being subpoenaed to testify as to this cause on the approaching trial. But if I bore this relationship to him, doctor, I would not be compelled to give evidence against him."

"But would your evidence so seriously affect Cassinove?"

"It would put the seal upon his fate."

"For heaven's sake, Miss Elmer, what is the nature of this testimony?"

"It is this. If I should be subpoenaed as a witness on this trial, I should be examined upon a subject which, apart from all my deep sympathy with the prisoner, would distress me deeply, would indeed crimson my brow with humiliation. I should have to speak of the evident antagonism between the late Sir Vincent Lester and Ferdinand Cassinove, and its cause——"

"But in doing that, my dear Miss Elmer, you would only

corroborate the testimony of many others as already given on the coroner's inquest. The antagonism between the deceased baronet and the prisoner was, as you expressed it, 'evident' to all the household."

"Yes, and if that were all, my testimony would be of little importance; but, oh heaven! I should have to testify to a fatal circumstance which the prosecution does not even suspect, to which I, of all the world, was the sole witness; and even though I know him to be guiltless, my testimony would put the final seal upon his doom."

"Miss Elmer, my child, tell me what this circumstance was, that I may judge of its importance. You may confide in me with perfect safety, for I shall never repeat your words; and even if I were capable of such a breach of confidence, it could do no harm since 'hearsay' is no legal evidence."

"It was a fierce and deadly quarrel between Ferdinand Cassinove and Sir Vincent Lester on the evening preceding the murder of the baronet," said Laura, in a low and shuddering voice.

"Good heaven, Miss Elmer!" exclaimed the doctor, in dismay.

"Yes; but *I* am the only one in the world who knows of this fatal quarrel. No one else on earth even suspects it. It took place in my school-room after school-hours, and immediately after the baronet's discovery of my betrothal to Cassinove. If I were to be subpœnaed I should have to testify of this fatal quarrel, and thus supply the only link in the chain of circumstantial evidence against an innocent man, and that man my best friend in the world. Thus you see Cassinove's life is in my hands. Yet I can only save him in one way, by taking a position that will make it impossible for me to give evidence against him; in one word, I can only hope to save Cassinove by redeeming at once my promise to become his wife. So you see how strong my whole argument is."

"I see, I see, my poor child! my loving, self-sacrificing child, I see it all! Tell me how I can serve you. What would you have me to do?"

"Doctor, you are a Christian gentleman—you believe in effectual prayer, and in providential guidance. Go home,

and reflect on all that I have told you. Put away all worldly thoughts and all conventional ideas. Think only of justice, faith and mercy. Pray to the Lord for direction; and to-morrow, when you visit Cassinove, you will know what to say and do," replied Laura Elmer, with sweet gravity, and she arose as if to close the interview.

He also arose. He looked at her—beautiful, pale statue that she seemed—and taking her hand, replied :

"I will, my child, I will; and may the Lord guide my thoughts, and direct and comfort you. Good-night." And he raised her hand to his lips, and departed.



CHAPTER XXXI.

A STRANGE SCENE IN NEWGATE.

Thou hast called me thine angel in moments of bliss;
Still thine angel I'll be through the horrors of this.—*Moore.*

THE next day, as soon as the prison doors were open, Dr. Clark took his way to Newgate. The prison is divided into the male and female wards—there is no other attempt at separation.

Dr. Clark turned into the male ward, where prisoners of all classes were confined together—an old, hardened criminal, and a youth merely suspected of offence, often sharing together the same cell; while the whole mass of prisoners, the burglar, the forger, the thief and the murderer, took their meals together at the same board, and their limited exercise in the same small courtyard or the same prison hall.

"And this is the wretched crowd through which Miss Elmer must pass on her visits to Cassinove," groaned the good doctor, as he loathingly followed the turnkey along a passage flanked with cells, and perambulated by miserable and brutal-looking men in every stage of vice, crime and

wretchedness, to the separate cell which the kindness of the governor had assigned to Cassinove.

Cassinove being yet untried, was not a close prisoner, and if he confined himself to his cell, it was to avoid contact with the degraded and brutalized mass of prisoners.

The turnkey conducted the doctor to the door of the cell, and civilly retired. The doctor went in.

The cell was a small, clean, well-lighted den, having on the right side a broad shelf against the wall, with a mattress and coarse coverlet upon it by way of a bed, and on the left side a plain deal table, with a bench before it.

Cassinove sat at the table, with his face partly averted from the door, and his head bowed upon his hand in a state of abstraction so deep as to render him unconscious of the gentle step of the doctor, who had thus an opportunity of observing him.

There were writing materials before him, but he seemed to have forgotten them. He was pale and wasted with the mental suffering that even now absorbed his mind and corrugated his brow.

"Good-morning, Mr. Cassinove," said the doctor, softly.

He started nervously; then recovering himself he arose with his usual courtesy, and held out his hand, saying, with a smile—

"This is very kind, Doctor Clark."

He then offered the doctor his seat, and placed himself on the side of his bed.

"You have been writing, I perceive," said the doctor, by way of commencing a conversation that he foresaw would be a very embarrassing one.

"Yes, as early as it is, my counsel has just left me. We have been talking over the best manner of conducting my defence, and I am making notes upon the only two points upon which I can lay any stress—the only thing that can save me, if any thing can save me under such an overwhelming avalanche of circumstantial evidence."

"And those two points of your defence, my dear young friend, what are they?"

"The first is an unimpeachably good character, for I do not

think there is a soul in the universe who could charge me with a single swerve from moral rectitude up to the hour of my arrest——”

“A strong argument in your favor, and yet not weighty enough in itself to withstand the mass of circumstantial evidence against you. What is the second?”

“The second is the total absence of the slightest motive on my part for the commission of such a crime.”

“A very strong point, indeed, and one which should support you, unless it should be overthrown by rebutting evidence.”

“By rebutting evidence, sir?” questioned Cassinove, doubtfully.

“I mean unless the opposite can be proved—unless it can be shown that with you the motive to the deed was *not* absent—unless it can be shown that there was jealousy and anger on your part, and a quarrel with the baronet,” said the doctor, very gravely.

Cassinove looked at him in painful surprise.

“My dear young friend, is it possible that you have forgotten the angry encounter between yourself and the baronet on the evening preceding the murder?” inquired the doctor, seriously.

“No! good heaven! no! but that encounter left no bitterness in my heart, and I had thought nothing of it,” replied Cassinove, in dismay.

“It will be hard to make the jury believe that it did not, when they know what followed it. No, Cassinove, the testimony to that encounter and quarrel between yourself and the baronet on the evening preceding the murder, is the only link wanting in the chain of circumstantial evidence that may convict an innocent man. Therefore, Cassinove, that testimony must not go before the jury.”

“But how to prevent it?” inquired Cassinove, doubtfully.

“There was but one witness to that encounter,” said the doctor.

“But one?”

“She has not yet been subpoenaed to appear on the trial, but she may be so any day this week; therefore, she must be

placed in a position to incapacitate her from giving evidence against you."

"Good heaven, doctor! what is it that you mean?" cried Cassinove, in agitation.

"Laura Elmer has long been your betrothed; you must make her your wife; as such, she cannot be summoned to bear witness against you."

"Not for ten thousand worlds! not to save my body from death, and my soul from Hades, would I drag that noble lady down to share the deep degradation of my present lot!" exclaimed Cassinove, rising and pacing excitedly the narrow space of his cell.

"I judged your answer would be such," observed the doctor, quietly.

"Why I loathe even to have her come here through all these degraded and brutalized wretches, even though her dear presence is the sweetest solace that I have. And when I see her coming, she seems an angel from heaven descending into Hades to comfort some lost spirit there. And you would have me marry her to save my own life! No! not to save my soul from eternal death would I draw down that noblest lady to such misery."

"Aye, I judged you would speak and think even so. But now, just resume your seat, and listen to me calmly while I speak to you; after which you may jump up and obstreperate if you like to do so."

With an impatient gesture, Cassinove sunk down on his seat upon the bed.

The doctor resumed:

"You say that not to save your life or soul will you draw down this noblest lady to share your own degradation and misery. Cassinove, where there is no crime, there can be no degradation. And as for your misery, Laura Elmer already shares that as deeply as one individual can share the troubles of another. It is killing her."

"I know it! Oh, I know it!" groaned Cassinove.

"The only comfort she has in this affliction is found in ministering to you."

"True, true; she is the angel of whom I spoke."

"But if she should be compelled to give that fatal evidence against you, and you should be—as you certainly *would* be—convicted upon her testimony, she would look upon herself as your murderer; she never would survive the catastrophe of your fate; it would be her death-blow; she would die of a violently broken heart. Judge, yourself, whether this would not be the fate of Laura Elmer?"

"I believe it! I believe it! Oh, heaven, that I could die before the trial comes on, and so save her from such distress," groaned Cassinove

"There is but one way. To save her from being your executioner, you must make her your wife!"

"But it is horrible to think of sacrificing her to my miserable necessities."

"It will not be sacrificing her; it will be taking the only course to save you from death, and her from distress worse than death."

"But if, after all, without her evidence, and simply upon that of others, I should be convicted—"

"But you must not think of that; you, a guiltless man must take every proper means for your defence, and expect to be acquitted. The most obvious means now is to marry Miss Elmer."

"But Laura—"

"I will escort her to you to-day, and you must see for yourself. Only remember, that there is no time to be lost."

"But, then, the difficulties attending such a ceremony in such a place as this."

"I will smooth them. Say nothing to any one upon the subject. I will bring Miss Elmer here on her daily visit to you. Then I will go and take out a special license and bring it, together with your own pastor, who will come as if on an ordinary pastoral visit to you. We will then close the door and commence the ceremony. I will both give the bride away and witness the marriage. After which, she may defy the subpoena, and thus the heaviest testimony will be lost to the prosecution," said the doctor.

And much more was argued upon the same subject before, at length, the argument of the doctor prevailed upon Mr.

Cassinove to accept so great a sacrifice as that which he believed the hand of Laura Elmer would be.

And then the doctor took his leave for a short time to make the arrangements for the strange marriage.

First, he called at the lodgings of Miss Elmer, whom he found dressed as if for a walk.

"My carriage is at the door, my child, and if you are going to visit our prisoner this morning, I will gladly take you there," said the doctor, artfully.

"I thank you; I was just going; I am quite ready, and need not detain you an instant," said Miss Elmer, joining him.

He took her down, placed her in the carriage, and drove rapidly to the prison. He took her into the prison, through all the halls and passages to the cell of Cassinove, saw her enter, and then withdrew to complete the arrangements that he had undertaken to make. First, he went and procured the special license. Then he called upon Cassinove's old pastor, the Rev. Henry Watson, of St. Matthews. He found the good old man in his study, and in a private interview, explained to him the service for which he was wanted.

Now, among the very few who had an unshaken faith in the innocence of Cassinove, was the Rev. Mr. Watson, the pastor, who had known him intimately from childhood up to maturity. So after a little hesitation at the strangeness of the service required of him, and after being assured by the doctor that there were good reasons why the marriage should be solemnized, the good man yielded to his faith in Doctor Clark and in Cassinove, and though greatly mystified, consented to go and perform the ceremony.

In the meantime Laura Elmer had passed into the cell of her betrothed.

Cassinove was sitting just where the doctor had left him, on the side of his mattress, with his hands clasped together, and his head sunk upon his breast. He looked up as Laura entered, and rising, extended his hands to her, saying—

"Oh, Laura! oh, my guardian spirit! can you surmise what Doctor Clark has been saying to me this morning?"

"Yes, yes, mine own, for I sent him to say it," replied Laura Elmer, with noble truthfulness, as she placed both her hands in his.

"And are you, my beautiful preserver, prepared for the sacrifice, which indeed I fear it is doing a great wrong to ask of you?"

She replied in almost the identical words used by the doctor—

"It will be no sacrifice on my part. It is the only possible way to save yourself from an unjustly-inflicted death, and me from a fatal remorse."

"Alas! Laura! when I first met and worshipped you—when I first dared to dream of the joy of making you my own—this was not the sort of bridal I pictured to myself!" said Cassinove, with a deep groan.

"No, my own; you thought of conquering fortune, and laying it at my feet, and of lifting me to a position higher, if possible, than that from which I fell. This is what you planned for me. And because you planned it, and because it pleased Heaven to disappoint your generous plan, here am I at your side, as willing—oh, yes—as willing to share your sorrows as ever I should have been to share your joys," said Laura, sitting down beside him.

"Oh!" groaned Cassinove, "if my guiltlessness is no plea to heaven or earth in my behalf, surely this woman's goodness must be! Surely, for *her* sake, God will bring light out of this great darkness! Heaven will not leave her to suffer!"

Thus they conversed together until their conference was interrupted by the opening of the cell-door, and the appearance of the warden, who ushered in a lady closely veiled, and retired

The lady threw aside her veil, and disclosed the sweet face of a friend.

"My dearest Rose!" cried Laura Elmer, rising to embrace her.

"The Duchess of Beresleigh!" exclaimed Mr. Cassinove, in surprise.

"Yes, it is I, my friends, come to see you once more. Indeed, I should have come sooner, but I have been ill; and oh! in so much trouble. You have heard about it, Miss Elmer?"

"Yes, sweet Rose! I heard, and I should have gone to you, but sorrows—such dark sorrows as ours—make us selfish, I fear," said Laura Elmer, as her heart smote her for the neglect of this gentle friend.

"I could not expect you to come, dear Miss Elmer. Doctor Clark, who attended me in my illness, told me——"

"That Miss Elmer was performing the part of a Sister of Charity to a lonely prisoner so zealously as to leave her no time to bestow upon her friends," said Cassinove, regretfully.

"Something like that, indeed. But I consider such duties so sacred as fully to exonerate Miss Elmer. I fully expected to find her here, and I am glad to have found her."

"I am here every day, dear Rose, to lighten as much as possible these dreary prison-hours. But I am here to-day for an especial purpose. Therefore, I am pleased that to-day of all days, you should be present," said Laura Elmer, gravely.

The young duchess looked from one to the other for an explanation.

"You are here involuntarily to witness a marriage," said Laura Elmer.

Rose looked more perplexed than before.

"Miss Elmer does not wish to be called as a witness on my approaching trial. To prevent this, she is about to bestow upon me her hand. Tell me, madam, for you are a disinterested judge, am I not doing a great wrong to accept so vast a sacrifice?" said Cassinove.

"But I do not understand," said Rose.

"She would immolate herself for the bare chance of saving my life," began Cassinove; but Laura gently placed her hand before his lips to stop his farther speech, and turning to the duchess, briefly, and in a low voice, explained the urgent necessity for the immediate marriage.

"You are right, dear Laura; I feel that you are quite right, although not one in a hundred would think it right, and not one in a thousand dare to do it even if they thought so," said Rose, earnestly.

"I am pleased that you agree with me, dear," replied Miss Elmer.

"And I am very much pleased that I happen to be here to support you, dear Laura! You required a woman's presence now did you not? Say so, to please me, dear Laura."

"I can say so with great sincerity, sweet Rose. I did indeed need the presence of some woman-friend, and I am most happy to have yours," replied Miss Elmer.

Once more they were interrupted by the opening of the cell-door and the entrance of Doctor Clark and Mr. Watson, who were ushered in by the turnkey, who immediately withdrew.

Doctor Clark recognized the Duchess of Beresleigh with surprise and pleasure, bowed, and presented the Rev. Mr. Watson.

The little party quite filled up the narrow cell.

"The officers of the prison seem to think that you are holding a levee this morning, Cassinove, and are probably wondering what it is about. I did not think proper to volunteer an explanation," said Doctor Clark, cheerfully.

"Young lady," said the minister, approaching Miss Elmer, and speaking in a low voice, "is this step that you are about to take well considered?"

"Yes, sir, it is well considered," answered Laura Elmer, gravely and firmly.

"In the name of heaven, then, I must proceed. Stand up, if you please," said the minister, opening his book.

Cassinove arose, and led Laura Elmer before him.

Doctor Clark took his place beside Cassinove, and the young duchess stood by Laura Elmer.

The marriage ceremony was commenced with the usual formulas. When they came to the question—"Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?"

"I do," said the venerable Doctor Clark, taking the hand of the bride and placing it in the hand of the bridegroom.

When they reached the point where the ring was required, there was no ring forthcoming. Good Doctor Clark had entirely forgotten that little necessity.

But the young duchess, hastily drawing a circlet of diamonds from her finger, offered it for the purpose, saying—

"Keep it, dear Laura, it is the emblem of truth."

The ring was placed upon her finger ; the vows were made, the prayers offered, the benediction bestowed, and the marriage ceremony concluded.

And thus, in the cell at Newgate, with the prison walls rising darkly around, and the scaffold looming fatally in the distance, Laura Elmer was made a bride.

Laura Elmer, with the splendid preparations for whose high nuptials this story opened.

Deeply Cassinove felt this contrast as he pressed his mourning bride for an instant to his heart.

Deeply, also, Rose felt it as she threw herself weeping into the arms of her friend.

Laura only was, as usual, composed, though very pale.

After the cordial clasping of hands, and earnestly breathed good wishes, their friends departed, leaving the newly-married pair together.

At the usual hour for closing, Laura took leave of Cassinove, and returned to her lodgings. She had soon good reason to know that her marriage had not taken place one hour too soon.

The next morning, while she was preparing to come out, a sheriff's officer was shown into her room, who served her with a document that proved to be a subpœna, addressed to Laura Elmer, spinster, and ordering her, under peril of certain pains and penalties, to appear upon a certain day at the Central Criminal Court, Old Bailey, as a witness on the part of the prosecution in the case of "*The Crown versus Ferdinand Cassinove, charged with the wilful murder of Sir Vincent Lester, Baronet.*"

Laura read it, and returned it, saying—

"This does not concern me. My name is not Elmer, neither am I a single woman."

"Then will you be good enough to tell me where I can find Miss Laura Elmer?"

"Nowhere, I presume ; I, who once bore that name, have now another."

"Then, madam, will you be so good as to tell me your new name, that I may have the mistake corrected?" said the officer, taking out his tablets.

"You need not give yourself that trouble. I am the wife of Ferdinand Cassinove, and therefore incapacitated from giving evidence on his trial," said Laura, gently.

The officer looked at her in surprise, and then muttering that he would see about it, departed.

And Laura Elmer went on her way to the prison, where she found Ferdinand Cassinove in close consultation with his counsel. The latter arose with a smile to greet the lady, saying—

"My client has just told me of the ceremony that took place here yesterday morning. I had already learned that a subpoena was out for you *this* morning, one day too late. You have achieved a great stroke of diplomacy, madam, and saved my client."

"If any thing can save him in such extremity," murmured Cassinove, under his breath.

"When does the trial come on, sir?" inquired Laura of the lawyer.

"To-morrow, madam."

CHAPTER XXXII.

TRIAL FOR LIFE.

No change comes o'er thy noble brow
Though ruin is around thee,
Thy eye-beam burns as brightly now
As when the laurel bound thee.

It was the morning of the day of the trial—the trial, *par excellence*, of the session—the trial of the tutor, Ferdinand Cassinove, for the murder of his employer, Sir Vincent Lester, one of the oldest baronets of England.

All London was talking of it. It formed the subject of conversation at every breakfast-table, every office and every shop in the city, as well as at the chambers of Messrs. Clagett and Fulmer, counsel for the prisoner, and at the cell at New-

gate, where Ferdinand Cassinove awaited his summons to the court-room.

Men are murdered every month, and other men are tried for the crime; but then the victims are not baronets of the creation of 1600.

In this case there was not that contrariety of opinion that usually attends popular judgment upon any public event.

The public had made up its mind with great unanimity that Cassinove was guilty, and that he must be convicted of course, so that there could be no anxiety as to the result of the trial, but notwithstanding that, people were curious to know the particulars of the dreadful tragedy at Lester House as they could only know them through the evidence given at the trial; they wished to see how the prosecution would be conducted; how the defence would be managed; and, above all, how the prisoner would conduct himself during the trial and the execution which they insisted must certainly follow.

At an unusually early hour, a crowd, composed in part of the most respectable citizens of London, collected in front of the Old Bailey to await the opening of the doors.

As soon as the doors were thrown open, this crowd pressed into the court-room as into a play-house, to witness the agonizing spectacle of a fellow-creature on trial for his life, as if it had been a play got up for their entertainment.

At ten o'clock the judges entered the court-room, and took their places on the bench.

And soon after the order was given to bring in the prisoner.

All eyes were now turned in the direction of the door through which the prisoner was expected to enter.

And in a few minutes Ferdinand Cassinove made his appearance, walking between two police-officers.

His step was firm, his carriage erect, his glance keen, and his bearing proud. His face was pale only in contrast to the darkness of the ebon locks that waved around his lofty brow, and the sable suit of clerical cloth that formed his usual costume.

Behind him walked Laura, clothed in deep mourning, and leaning on the arm of the venerable Doctor Clark.

All eyes were fixed upon this little sorrowful procession as it passed up the room. All tongues were busy in criticism upon it.

"How very handsome the prisoner is!" said one of those ladies, who, I regret to say, formed a considerable portion of the assembly.

"A fine face," said another.

"A noble figure," remarked a third.

"How extremely interesting!" exclaimed a fourth.

"Hem! villains usually are so, mesdames," remarked one of their attendant gentlemen.

"But who is that beautiful dark woman in black, on the arm of the gray-haired man, walking behind the prisoner?" inquired another.

"That must be his wife, the young person who was governess at Lester House at the time that he was tutor there, and who has married him since his arrest. There are few women who would do such a thing as that to save any man."

"I thought that the story of the marriage was a mere newspaper report."

"No, it is a fact, I assure you; it is supposed that she sacrificed herself to avoid giving testimony against him."

And here the speaker began to relate all he thought he knew about the marriage in question.

Meanwhile the little procession moved on. On reaching the upper end of the court-room, near the bench, it was divided.

Laura was accommodated with a seat near Mr. Cassinove's counsel.

Doctor Clark unwillingly took his place among the witnesses on the part of the Crown.

And Ferdinand Cassinove was ushered into the prisoner's dock. He looked around himself, over the sea of faces upturned to his; no friendly look among them; the hundreds of eyes fixed upon him; no kindly glance from them. Curiosity, horror, and vindictiveness was the expression of the multitude.

Cassinove turned away, and sat down with a sinking heart. He had never before, even as a witness or a spectator, entered

a criminal court. And although for many days he had been gradually approaching this crisis, and had supposed himself fully prepared to meet it, yet the fact of his present position now struck him with all the force of a sudden shock.

A great deal of nonsense has been talked and written about the boldness of innocence—the “sustaining power of conscious innocence,” etc. It is not true. Innocence alone is too feeble and timid a thing to put on a bold front, or support any one in a world like this. We have all of us seen innocence stand confounded at the bare charge of crime, and guilt brave it out to the last; and if Ferdinand Cassinove maintained a firm and undaunted bearing above his sinking heart, it was not from conscious innocence, although he knew he possessed it, but from a certain natural courage, fortitude, and self-respect, that stood him in good stead. He next turned his eyes down upon the witnesses for the prosecution, who were seated together on his left hand. They were principally the family from Lester House, among whom Cassinove regretted to see the widowed Lady Lester, whom he recognized by her figure and her weeds, though her face was quite concealed behind the thick folds of her black crape veil. She was supported by her eldest son, and surrounded by her domestics. This sorrowing group, all in the deepest mourning for the murdered head of the family, added much to the painful solemnity of the scene, and to the strong popular feeling against the murderer.

Wearily, despairingly, Cassinove turned from this black array to look upon the group of witnesses for the defence, who were seated on his right hand. They were very few in number—consisting of his venerable pastor, his old schoolmaster, and his old nurse, all come to testify to the excellence of his character from his childhood up. With these Cassinove was astonished to see old Colonel Hastings, dressed in deep mourning, and looking worn and wasted as though from long illness. Cassinove beckoned Mr. Fulmer, his junior counsel, and inquired—

“How came Colonel Hastings hither?”

“He presented himself this morning as a voluntary witness for the defence. He has just arrived from Baden-

Baden, where his constitution received a terrible shock in the death of his only and idolized son."

"The death of his son? Mr. Albert Hastings? When did he die?" inquired Cassinove, in surprise.

"About a month ago."

"Was he long ill?"

"In body, not an hour. In mind, always, I fear! He blew his brains out after losing fifty thousand pounds at a card-table in Baden-Baden. It has broken his father's heart, as you may see. The old man was ill for many days after the catastrophe, and has only just now arrived in England, to serve you if he can, he says."

"I am very sorry for his awful bereavement. But he is so little a friend of mine, that I am surprised to see him here as a witness for the defence."

"Affliction such as his changes the whole spirit of a man. He has nothing more to hope for in this world, and nothing to do but to prepare for the next. Perhaps, if he has been unjust to you, he wishes to make you amends," suggested the lawyer.

"No, I cannot complain that he has ever been unjust to me; he has only been unfriendly, with what, I suppose, he considered good reason," said Cassinove; and the short conversation ended, and the counsel returned to his place.

Cassinove once more turned his attention to the witnesses for the defence, and now, for the first time, he noticed, seated among them, a young lad, dressed like so many in this sorrowful assembly, in funereal black. As he gazed in surprise and doubt, the boy turned his face full upon the prisoner, who immediately recognized his late pupil, young Percy Lester. Percy Lester among the witnesses for the defence, while his mother and brother sat arrayed upon the side of the prosecution! Cassinove knew that the youth had been very fond of him, but he had not expected to find him there. Tears that nothing else could have brought there filled his eyes as he gazed upon the lad. Percy saw this, and began to fidget in his seat, and finally, addressing himself to one of the lawyers near him, he said—

"Please, sir, may I be permitted to speak to the prisoner?"

"Yes, if you will be quick and quiet, for the proceedings are about to commence."

The boy left his seat, and gliding quickly and quietly as he had been directed, reached the dock, and held up his hand to the prisoner, saying—

"See, Mr. Cassinove! Look at me, for all these people can say and do, they can never make *me* believe you guilty. If they could, Mr. Cassinove, I never could offer you my hand as I do now, could I?"

"No, Percy, no; nor could I take your innocent hand were *mine* stained with your father's blood," answered Cassinove, with strong emotion, as he pressed that young hand fervently.

"I know it, Mr. Cassinove, and even when I grieved most for my father, I grieved also for you, and my anger burned against the murderer whose one act sent *him* to his grave and you to a prison. For I knew in my soul that you were not guilty, because you never would hurt a bird, or a fish, or even a fly, and so I continued to tell everybody, until, at last, they subpoenaed me to tell the same thing to the jury here. And I am glad to come and give them my opinion. So, if it should go very hard with you, Mr. Cassinove, and every one should continue to scowl at you as they are doing now, you turn and look at me, so that I may *look* my thoughts, and say you are innocent even when I must not speak."

"I will! dear boy, I will! God bless you, lad! you do not know how greatly your simple faith in my innocence comforts me, whereas, if I were really guilty, that same faith of yours would pierce my bosom like a sword," said Cassinove, fervently pressing the boy's hand.

"But your mother, my dear Percy?" inquired Cassinove.

"My mother is on the other side, to be sure; but then she does not feel half so confident in your guilt as she did at first. *Then*, you know, she was distracted with grief, and said things she is sorry for now, and that caused her to be subpoenaed here as a witness against you."

"Well, God bless you, Percy, for your steadfast faith! And now, dear boy, you had better return to your place, as I

believe they are about to commence," said Cassinove, once more pressing the young hand that had been so kindly extended to him.

In passing on to his seat among the witnesses, Percy stopped to shake hands with Laura, and to say :

"I wish I might sit by you, but you see how it is here."

"I thank you, dear Percy, for your good-will ; and oh, Percy ! if you should live to be an old man, it will make you happy to remember this day of your youth when your boyish hand was held out to comfort one in sore affliction," said Laura, fervently, as the boy pressed her fingers, and passed on to his seat.

The crier now commanded silence in court, and the crowd immediately became quiet.

The deputy clerk of the arraigns then arose, and called upon the prisoner to stand forward, and give attention while the indictment was read.

Cassinove arose, and advanced to the front of the dock.

The clerk then proceeded to read the indictment, setting forth that on the first day of October, between the hours of one and two in the morning, Ferdinand Cassinove, the prisoner at the bar, being instigated by the devil, with malice aforethought, did feloniously break into the bed-chamber of Sir Vincent Lester, Baronet, and him wilfully murder by inflicting upon him with a dagger two mortal wounds through the heart.

When the reading of the indictment was finished, the prisoner was directed to hold up his hand, while the clerk of arraigns demanded :

"Ferdinand Cassinove, you have heard the indictment charging you with the wilful murder of Sir Vincent Lester. Are you guilty or not guilty of the felony laid to your charge ?"

"Not guilty, so help me God, in this my utmost need," said Cassinove, in a tone of profound emotion, elevating his hand as though appealing to the Omniscient Judge of all righteousness.

To the usual question as to how he would be tried, he gave the usual answer, "By God and my country," and then re-

sumed his seat amid low murmurs of sympathy, called forth by his youth, graceful bearing, and earnest manner of pleading.

The Attorney-General then taking the indictment in his hand, proceeded to open the case for the Crown by stating at large the facts attending the murder for which the prisoner at the bar had been indicted, commented severely as he progressed upon the atrocious nature of homicide in general, and of this murder in particular, wherein he said were all the vices of ingratitude, hypocrisy, and cowardice. Wherein the prisoner, young in years, but old in crime, had heinously murdered his own benefactor—not in broad daylight, face to face with his intended victim—no ! but “in the dead waste and middle of the night,” when all the household, save himself, had sunk to innocent repose, the cowardly assassin stole to the bedchamber of Sir Vincent Lester, and there, in that scene of stillness, in that hour of darkness, while the victim lay helpless in sleep—“innocent sleep”—plunged the dagger into the heart of his benefactor.

Here the prisoner's face flushed crimson ; it was terrible to sit and hear these charges of baseness, which his soul scorned, made upon him without his being able as yet to reply. He looked towards his young wife. Her eyes were fixed upon him with devoted affection ; their steady glance said, plainly—

“Oh, be patient ; this is but a form, in which the officer does but his usual duty.”

And for her sweet sake, Cassinove controlled the swelling emotions of his soul, and preserved an exterior of calmness during the remainder of the long denunciatory speech of the Attorney-General, who perorated with the usual statement that he should now undertake to prove the facts in the indictment, and the guilt of the prisoner, by competent witnesses, and sat down.

The clerk then called the name of—

“Clara, Lady Lester.”

And there was a general rising and craning of necks to catch a glimpse of the baronet's widow, as she moved from her seat among the witnesses and went forward to take the stand, where her stout, black-robed, deeply-veiled form, stood revealed to all eyes.

After having the oath duly administered to her, she was requested to look at the prisoner, and turned to meet the full, dark eyes of Cassinove fixed with a look of anxious integrity upon her. This was the first time she had seen him since the night of the murder, and his expression of countenance evidently surprised her.

Cassinove and Laura both wondered what Lady Lester would have to testify in regard to the murder, when they knew that her ladyship had slept soundly through the whole of the tragic scenes of that fatal first of October. It was known when she began to speak.

"I am the widow of the deceased. I know the prisoner at the bar; he filled the situation of tutor of our younger son, and resided in our house for nearly twelve months."

"Can your ladyship inform the jury what seemed to be the state of feeling between the deceased and prisoner?" inquired the counsel for the Crown.

"At first the deceased and the prisoner seemed to entertain for each other as cordial a friendship as could possibly exist between persons of unequal rank and age. Gradually, but evidently, that friendship cooled, until, at length, it changed to a bitter enmity."

"Will your ladyship tell the court how this enmity exhibited itself?"

"In many daily acts of mutual annoyance; in many looks, words, and deeds of hatred."

"Your ladyship will please to be specific, and instance some of these stated acts of mutual annoyance."

"In the first place, Sir Vincent Lester very much disliked the attentions paid by Mr. Cassinove to a young person residing in the capacity of governess in our family. And though Mr. Cassinove was well aware of Sir Vincent's disapprobation he not only persisted in those attentions, but augmented them——"

Here a titter ran through the crowd, mingled with murmurs of "Very natural," "Quite right," etc.

The crier called "Silence!" and the examination of Lady Lester proceeded.

"This was one of the ways in which the prisoner annoyed

the deceased. Will your ladyship tell us now, in what manner the deceased annoyed the prisoner?" questioned the counsel

"By throwing every obstacle he could in the way of Mr. Cassinove's conversation with the governess."

"What motive do you suppose the deceased had for this course of conduct towards the prisoner?"

This question was challenged, objected to, and ruled out

The counsel put it in another form, and inquired:

"What was the cause of this hatred between the prisoner and the deceased?"

Here even the cold, calm Lady Lester reddened, as she replied:

"I can testify with certainty only to the enmity; the knowledge of its cause belongs only to Him who seeth the secret heart of man."

"But what then does your ladyship suppose to have been the cause?"

This question was also objected to, and ruled out. And after a close cross-examination, that elicited nothing more than a reiteration of the first testimony, Lady Lester was permitted to withdraw.

Sir Ruthven Lester was now called to the stand, and duly sworn. After which he corroborated the testimony of his mother, but added nothing new.

The next witness called was Soper, the valet of the late baronet. He testified that on the evening preceding the murder, the deceased had come down from the school-room in a great passion, saying that Cassinove had deeply offended him, and should not remain in the house another twenty-four hours; witness attended deceased to his chamber, and waited on him until he got into bed, when he said, "If I live until morning, I will turn that fellow out of doors." Witness then closed and secured the window-shutters, so that no one from without could possibly enter the room, and left his master to repose. That was the last time he saw deceased alive.

Cross-examination elicited no further testimony, and Soper was directed to withdraw.

While this witness was being examined, Laura had contrived to move nearer to Cassinove, and now sat at the corner

of the dock where she might easily converse with the prisoner, for she knew what was next coming, and wished to be beside him to comfort him by word and look.

Watson, the butler, was now called to the stand. Again there was a lifting of all heads and craning of all necks to get sight of this most important witness, who was most interesting as the first discoverer of the murder.

Being regularly sworn he said :

“ My name is John Watson. I have lived as butler in the service of the deceased for the last twenty years. I know the prisoner at the bar who has been tutor, at Lester House for the last twelve months. I had observed for the last few weeks the state of enmity between the prisoner and the deceased. On the night of the murder, I was sitting up late in my office, adjoining the pantry, engaged in making out my accounts, when, it might be about two o'clock in the morning, I was startled by the cries of ‘murder! murder! murder! murd——’ four times, only the fourth time the word seemed strangled in the throat of the one that cried, and there followed a deep, ominous silence. I threw down my pen, and rushed up-stairs, towards my master’s room, whence those cries seemed to have proceeded; I burst open the door, and found my master, wounded and dying, yet grappling with a death-grip the collar of the prisoner, who stood over him with a blood-stained, dripping dagger in his hand. As soon as my master saw me, he exclaimed feebly :

“ ‘Seize him! seize him! he has murdered me, the villain!’

“And by this time the chamber was filled with my fellow-servants, who had been roused by the cries of murder, and hurried to the spot as quickly as they could spring from their beds and throw on their clothes.

“ I said, ‘In the name of heaven, what is all this?’ ”

“ ‘He has murdered me—he, he, the wretch!’ exclaimed my master, who immediately fell back and expired.”

“Did the deceased mention the prisoner by name?” inquired the counsel for the Crown.

“Not once.”

“Did the deceased appear collected and self-possessed when making this dying declaration?”

"No; he seemed wild and distracted."

This witness was now subjected to a severe cross-examination, which failed to shake his very important evidence.

The other domestics were all examined in turn, and all corroborated the testimony of the butler as to the position in which the deceased and the prisoner were found on the occasion of the discovery of the murder, as well as the testimony of Sir Ruthven and Lady Lester in regard to the enmity that had existed between the tutor and the late baronet.

Doctor Clark was then called to the stand and examined as to the condition of the body when found, the nature of the wound, etc. And with the conclusion of his testimony, the evidence for the Crown closed.

And the court adjourned until nine o'clock the next day.

The crowd immediately dispersed, commenting, as they went out, upon the weight of the evidence and the prospects of the prisoner.

"Not a hope in the world remains for him," said one.

"The clearest case I ever knew in my life," said another.

And all agreed that the guilt of the prisoner was abundantly proved; that the defence would be a mere form; and that his conviction and execution was as certain as any future event could possibly be.

And through all this crowd of un pitying faces and Babel of accusing and condemning tongues, passed the prisoner in charge of the sheriff, and his beautiful wife leaning, as before, on the arm of Doctor Clark. As they walked the short distance between the court-house and the prison, Laura found herself beside Cassinove, who said, in a low voice—

"What a case they have made out against me, dear one! They have even proved enmity between Sir Vincent and myself, which, heaven knows, existed but on his side. And they have proved this without your evidence. Alas! dearest, you have sacrificed yourself in vain."

"No, not in vain; if my affection and presence can sustain you through this ordeal or comfort you—afterwards," murmured his devoted wife.

As the hour for closing the prison had arrived, Laura took

leave of him at the gates, and returned to her lodgings. And as soon as she had entered her chamber and closed the door, she threw herself upon the bed and gave way, in floods of tears, to the pent-up agony of the whole day.

Neither food nor drink had passed her lips that day ; body as well as mind was utterly exhausted.

There was none to comfort her ; no kind hand to bring her a refreshing cup of tea, to restore fainting nature ; no kind voice to whisper a word of hope to revive failing courage. She was utterly alone in her anguish. Could Rose have known this, she would have left her luxurious palace and come and brought Laura away from these miserable lodgings, or else remained to console her in them. But the young duchess had only seen Laura abroad, or at the prison, clothed in her decent mourning, and could not guess at the miserable poverty, want, and loneliness into which her gifted friend had fallen.

Thus Laura was alone in her anguish ; nor would she have had it otherwise, while Cassinove was alone in his prison cell.

She passed the night in paroxysms of grief, alternating with fits of prostration and stupor that were rather nature's swooning than healthful sleep. Near morning, after a paroxysm more violent than any preceding one, she fell into a stupor deeper than usual, so that it was late in the morning when she awoke from this last swoon or sleep—from deep unconsciousness to sudden and piercing realization of all the misery of her situation. But the necessity of self-control and self-exertion was imminent. She felt that she must go to the prison, and, hopeless and comfortless herself, speak words of hope and comfort to her husband.

She arose, but found herself so feeble as to be near falling again. With a great effort, she bathed her face, smoothed her hair, and arranged her disordered dress. And then she sank down in her chair.

Some refreshments were absolutely necessary to sustain nature through the coming hours. After some painful hesitation, she rang her bell, knowing very well that her landlady, who was also maid-of-all-work to her lodgers, would answer it

There are some creatures bearing the human form, yet so much lower in nature than the lowest animal, that "it were base flattery to call them brutes."

Of such was Laura's landlady, with whom she dreaded coming in contact, as a refined and sensitive nature must dread collision with a thoroughly coarse and vulgar one.

These later bitter sorrows, that had so crushed Laura's heart, had discrowned her of much of that queenliness of spirit and of manner that had once commanded homage from all who approached her. Perhaps, also, Mrs. Brown was much too obtuse to be impressed by any thing more subtile than material agency. Be that as it may, since Laura had fallen into arrears for her lodging, she had suffered much from the coarse insolence of her landlady, and hence she shivered with apprehension when she rang the bell that was to bring this animal to her presence.

The landlady entered—a tall, stout, vulgar woman, with a red face, bloated cheeks, and small, watery eyes. She entered with a swaggering walk and an insolent air, demanding, harshly—

"What do you want?"

"A cup of coffee, if you please," answered Laura, with a low voice and averted face.

"You'd better pay for what you *has* had before you ask for more."

"I will certainly pay you for all if you will be kind enough to bring me the coffee."

"I'll not do it until you pays for what you has had."

"I have not a penny in the house——"

"Then you've no business to be in the house yourself. But them as wears diment rings ain't no call to want money," said the woman, fixing her piggish eyes upon the brilliant that the young duchess had given Laura as a wedding-ring.

At another time Laura, for the sake of the giver, would have hesitated to part with the gift; but now time pressed, she had great need to take refreshment and proceed at once to the prison to comfort Cassinove. So she drew the ring from her finger and handed it to the woman, saying—

"Here take it, and keep it as security until I pay you, only bring me the coffee."

The promptitude with which Laura offered the ring excited the suspicions of the woman, who, like all vulgar natures, piqued herself upon being "sharp."

"No, I'll not take it; it may be a piece of glass set in brass for what I know, and not worth twopence."

For all answer Laura held the ring out, turning it about in the morning sunlight until it burned and flashed until the living rays of light leaped from its centre.

"Well, then, and it may be a real diment for what I know; but, even so, how did you come by it? Them as wisits jail-birds is to be suspicioned; and I never received no stolen goods in my life."

"Very well, then be good enough to leave the room," said Laura, in a calm, commanding tone, that enforced obedience even from that stolid creature.

Laura then put on her mantle and bonnet, and though very feeble, went down-stairs, and walked the short distance to Giltspur street, where she remembered to have seen a pawnbroker's shop, kept by one Issachar. The rude speech of the landlady had done her this service, it had suggested the means of relieving her present necessities, that would never else have presented itself to her mind. At another time she might have grieved to part with her ring, and blushed to enter a pawnbroker's shop, but now heavier sorrows and keener anxieties absorbed her whole soul. She entered the shop, where a little, dark, hook-nosed, gimlet-eyed man stood behind the counter.

"How much will you give me for this ring?" said Laura, advancing and laying it upon the counter.

"Eh! mine shole, vere did you get dish?" exclaimed old Issachar, pouncing down upon the jewel, and glaring upon it with ravenous eyes.

"No matter, so that it is mine, and I have a right to part with it!"

"Do you want to shell it?" asked the pawnbroker, with difficulty concealing his eagerness.

"No, only to pledge it. How much will you advance me upon it?"

"Eh, mine tear, it ish not wort sho mush either, now I

looksh at it," said Issachar, recovering his composure and craftiness.

"Very well; name the sum that you are willing to advance upon it."

"Eh, mine tear shole, monish is very scarsh. I will advance five pounds on it."

The ring was worth an hundred guineas at least, but Laura was far too much oppressed with trouble to chaffer with the fellow, so she said:

"Give me the money, and a receipt for the ring, so that I may redeem it as soon as I can."

Issachar immediately handed her the money and a ticket, and eagerly took and locked up the ring, which he hoped would yet revert to himself.

Laura left the shop, returned to her lodgings, and rang again for the landlady. That animal sulkily made her appearance.

"How much do I owe you?" inquired Laura.

"Two-pun-ten, and I reckon you'll never owe me less," said the woman, insolently.

"Here are three pounds. Bring me the change and my coffee immediately."

The woman obeyed, and soon set before her lodger a comfortable breakfast.

Without removing her bonnet, Laura hastily drank a cup of coffee, ate a morsel of bread, and then, feeling somewhat refreshed, put the mask of a cheerful countenance over her sorrowful heart, and proceeded to the prison. She reached the cell a little before the hour that the prisoner was to be conveyed to the court. The governor was with him, but retired as soon as his wife appeared, leaving the unhappy young couple the solace of a few moments' private conference.

"How did you pass the night?" inquired Laura, affectionately, sitting down beside him on the cot.

"Well, dear love, very well," said Cassinove, assuming a more cheerful countenance than his sad heart warranted. "And you, Laura?"

"I slept until quite late this morning," she said, evasively, smiling in his face.

"That is right. To-day, dear love, must decide my fate. Can my true wife be firm?"

"Firm as a rock and true as steel! Never doubt me," replied Laura, courageously, although her heart was secretly breaking.

He pressed a kiss upon her brow, and then opened the door to admit Doctor Clark and the officers who had come to conduct him to the court-house.

Doctor Clark greeted Laura and Cassinove with great kindness. And, then, as it was near nine o'clock, the party set out for the session-house. The prisoner walked between the two officers, and Laura leaned upon the arm of her venerable friend, as on the preceding day.

They found the space in front of the court-house thronged with people, who were trying in vain to press into the building.

They found the court-room much fuller than on the preceding day, crowded, in fact, to suffocation.

"As I am to be examined to-day for the defence, my dear, I may sit beside you, and take care of you," said the good old doctor, as he supported Laura towards the upper end of the court.

As before, Cassinove was placed in the dock, where he stood pale, firm, and calm, above the crowd of faces turned up to him in morbid curiosity or cruel vindictiveness. He looked before him towards the bench, and saw that the brow of the judge was stern; towards the jury-box, where the faces of the jurors were very grave; he glanced to the right, where the witnesses for the defence seemed sorrowful and despondent; to the left, where those for the prosecution appeared confident and vindictive. And then from all these blood-thirsty or despairing faces, his eyes turned for rest and comfort upon the beautiful, pale brow of his devoted wife, as she sat close to the dock, sustained by the proximity of the venerable Doctor Clark.

The crier called silence in the court, and Mr. Fulmer, the junior counsel for the prisoner, arose to open the defence.

This advocate was young, ardent, enthusiastic, eloquent, and armed with perfect faith in the innocence of his client, and the consequent justice of his cause.

He began by reviewing the address of the Crown's counsel,

and pulling to pieces with great ingenuity the enormous mass of testimony raised against his client. It was all circumstantial evidence at best, he said, a mere mountain of fog, that could not stand for a moment before the clear sunlight of his client's irreproachable character. The dying declaration of the agonized and distracted man, upon which such great stress had been laid, could not be distorted into an accusation of his client, since the name of Mr. Cassinove had not been mentioned. If the dying man clung with a death-grip to the prisoner, he clung to him only as his preserver. The deportment of Mr. Cassinove when discovered at the bedside of Sir Vincent Lester was not that of detected guilt; he exhibited no agitation, except a benevolent anxiety to procure medical assistance for the wounded man. Neither could there be any adequate motive on the part of Mr. Cassinove for the perpetration of so heinous a crime. The enmity said to have been observed between the prisoner and the deceased was not proved by any overt act on the part of either; the alleged enmity, therefore, existed only in the opinions of those who had testified concerning it. And, finally, Mr. Cassinove's whole life, from childhood up to the very hour of his arrest, had been distinguished for the love and practice of truth, justice, and benevolence, and they formed the most overwhelming refutation of the heinous charge that had been brought against him. He would undertake to establish by unquestionable testimony every point that he here advanced. And he hoped and believed that the jury, after hearing this testimony, would acquit the prisoner before leaving their seats. For in view of Mr. Cassinove's irreproachable character, the slight foundation of the charge brought against him, and the strength of his cause, he would venture to claim for his client, not only an honorable acquittal, but a triumphant vindication!

Merely to show the line of the defence, I have given this sketch of the advocate's opening speech—a skeleton that he filled out and clothed with all the wealth of his legal acumen, and all the richness of his burning eloquence.

At the close of his speech, he called to the stand the Rev. Henry Watson.

The venerable pastor advanced, and being duly sworn, testified that he had known Ferdinand Cassinove, the prisoner, from his infancy up to the present moment, and had always known him as distinguished for perfect integrity, pure conscientiousness, and, above all, for a fervent benevolence that had often moved him to acts of great self-sacrifice to save others from even trifling sufferings. And here the venerable pastor related several instances in which he had seen those qualities of conscientiousness and benevolence severely tested and brightly illustrated.

He withdrew from the stand amid murmurs of surprise from the spectators, whom his evidence had seriously impressed in favor of the prisoner.

Doctor Clark, the next witness, corroborated the testimony of his predecessor as to the excellence of the prisoner's moral character, and also to his appearance and manner on the night of the murder, which, witness said, were not those of a guilty man.

Many other witnesses corroborated the statement of the clergyman and the physician, among whom was Colonel Hastings, who gave his testimony with an earnestness and even solemnity that made a great impression.

The young Percy Lester was called to the stand, and again every head was lifted, and every neck strained, to get sight of the youngest son of the murdered man in the witness-box on the part of the prisoner; and murmurs of sympathy moved the crowd as they gazed upon the lad standing there in his deep mourning, with his earnest young face upturned towards the clerk who was administering the oath.

What the boy had to say was not much, and yet it made a very great impression, for he spoke with a fervent, earnest, loving faith in the prisoner's innocence, and his unvarying kindness towards every creature, and he gave many instances of that kindness.

When examined on the subject of the enmity alleged to have existed between the deceased and the prisoner, the boy said :

"There was only a coolness between my father and Mr. Cassinove; but Mr. Cassinove did not hate my father; he

always respected and admired him, and taught me to reverence him."

The cross-examination of the lad only brought out this testimony with increased force.

And here closed the examination of witnesses for the defence.

The senior counsel for the prisoner arose and addressed the jury in a powerful speech, made up a review of the evidence, strengthened by sound logic, illumined by clear reason, and warmed by burning eloquence.

And at the end of an hour the advocate sat down amid murmurs of admiration.

And here rested the defence.

There was no rebutting evidence offered. The counsel for the crown said that they were not disposed to question the previous good character of the prisoner in order to prove him capable of committing that crime which it was already abundantly proved that he had committed. They had nothing to do with the prisoner's past life; they took him up from the moment of his perpetration of the felony that had placed him at the bar; and they would only recall the attention of the jury to that indestructible mass of evidence which neither the logic of the learned counsel who had just preceded him, nor the eloquence of the talented advocate who had opened the defence, had been able to move. There stood the convicting fact as firm as ever—the prisoner discovered in the very attitude of assassination, with the weapon of secret murder in his hand, held arrested in the grasp of the dying man, whose very last words accused him as his assassin. That was the *fact* proved by more than a dozen eye-witnesses; the *fact* that could not be explained away by any ingenuity of sophistry, and upon that convicting *fact* the prosecution would rest its case. And he resumed his seat.

Here Laura turned very pale, and dropped her face in her hands; but only for an instant; then recovering herself, she looked up in time to meet Cassinove's anxious gaze with a smile of encouragement.

The judge rose to charge the jury. He summed up the evidence on both sides, characterizing that of the prosecution

as the strangest testimony known in law, and that of the defence as an affecting expression of feeling and opinion on the part of the witnesses, calculated rather to move the sympathies than to convince the reason of the jury, whose duty it was to be guided by reason rather than sympathy, and to bring in their verdict in accordance with facts rather than opinions. But after hearing and well weighing the evidence on both sides of this case, if a single doubt of the prisoner's guilt disturbed their judgment, he enjoined them, in the name of justice and humanity, to give the prisoner the benefit of that doubt.

The judge resumed his seat, and the jury, in charge of the deputy-sheriff, retired to another room, to deliberate upon their verdict.

As the door closed upon the last receding figure, a dread silence fell upon the crowded court-room. The shadow of the scaffold seemed to lower darkly over the scene. A stifling atmosphere of mortality seemed to fill the room.

And the prisoner and his devoted wife? How bore *they* this hour of breathless, suffocating suspense?

LIFE—DEATH—in the trembling balance of fate!

Life—Death—Oh, God! if it should be life!—what an infinite deliverance! what an overpowering rapture of joy!

But if it should be death?

As the long-drawn agony of this hour grew heavier with every slowly-passing minute, Laura became whiter, colder, and more oppressed; her face seemed marble, her hands ice, her breath gasping; she was upon the verge of swooning.

“For the love of God, a glass of wine for my wife, quickly!” exclaimed Cassinove, leaning over the dock, and addressing an officer of the court.

The man kindly hastened away in search of the required restorative, and presently returned, bringing a glass of brandy and water—there was no wine to be got.

Doctor Clark placed the glass at the lips of Laura, and forced her to swallow a few drops, after which she gently pushed it away, saying:

“Thank you, it is over now; I will not let my courage fail again; no, I will not indeed, Doctor Clark. I will not, dear Cassinove.” And she sat up.

She had need of all her firmness now, for the sudden low murmur and subdued motion of the crowded court-room announced some event of supreme interest at hand.

She looked up, and her heart paused in its pulsations; her brain reeled, and her sight failed, as she perceived the black group of the jury solemnly re-entering the court. The scene receded from her senses; the voice of the clerk sounded distant and dreamy as he asked the question:

"Gentlemen of the jury, have you agreed upon your verdict?"

"We have," responded the solemn voice of the foreman.

"Look upon the prisoner. Prisoner, look upon the jury."

Ferdinand Cassinove stood up and confronted the twelve men who held his fate in their hands, and fixed his eagle eyes firmly upon the face of the foreman.

The clerk of arraigns spoke:

"How say you, gentlemen of the jury, is the prisoner, Ferdinand Cassinove, guilty or not guilty of the felony with which he stands charged?"

There was an instant's pause, in which you might have heard the beating of the hundred hearts in that hall, and then the foreman, in a broken voice, dropped the word of doom:

"Guilty."

There was heard a woman's half-smothered shriek, and then the silence fell deeply as before.

Then the voice of the judge arose:

"Ferdinand Cassinove, have you aught to urge why the sentence of the court should not be pronounced upon you?"

Cassinove advanced to the front of the dock, and answered:

"Yes, my lord; it were unjust to one who bears my name, as well as to my own conscious integrity, to let that sentence pass without protestation. And though what I have to advance will not affect that sentence in the least degree, or delay my death for an hour, still, for that lady's sake as well as for my own, I must repeat here, at the close of my trial, what I pleaded at its commencement, and say that I am not guilty of the death of Sir Vincent Lester, so help me God, at this my utmost need! That the judge and the jury have per-

formed, conscientiously performed, their duty, in accordance with the amazing weight of the circumstantial evidence against me, I freely admit; but that the circumstantial evidence has misled them into the conviction of a guiltless man, I must insist. I am guiltless of the death of Sir Vincent Lester. I said it at the commencement of my trial; I say it now; I shall say it in the hour of death, and on the day of judgment! My lord, I have done." And with a grave inclination of the head, Cassinove resumed his seat.

A murmur of admiration, doubt, and compassion ran through the crowd. But above this arose the voice of the crier—

"Let there be silence in the court while sentence of death is pronounced upon the prisoner."

And a silence like that of the grave fell upon the breathless assembly.

The judge then put on that solemn part of the judicial insignia, that badge of doom, the black velvet cap, and rose from his seat. The prisoner was also directed to stand up. Cassinove once more arose, and advanced to the front of the dock.

"The judge addressed him—

"Ferdinand Cassinove, after a careful and impartial trial, you have been convicted by a jury of your peers of the heinous crime of wilful murder. It becomes, therefore, my painful duty to pronounce upon you the sentence of the law. But before passing it, I would admonish you that however you may insist upon your guiltlessness, the weight of the evidence against you, and the atrocity of the crime with which you have been convicted, leave you not the slightest hope of pardon in this world. And I implore you, in view of the short space that remains, to lose no time in seeking, by repentance and confession, that Divine mercy which is never refused to the penitent sinner, however darkly guilty. The sentence of the court is, that you, Ferdinand Cassinove, be taken from hence to the place from whence you came, and from thence to the place of execution, and be there hanged by the neck until you be dead, and may God in his infinite goodness have mercy on your soul."

And the judge sat down, overcome by his emotions.

Cassinove bowed to the bench, and then turned to see how his wife bore this decree of doom. She was standing up, pale and still, with her hands clasped, and her eyes raised to the face of her husband. The agony of suspense was past now, and the calmness of death seemed already to overshadow her

"The blow has fallen, love ; it is all over !" murmured the deep-toned voice of the young man.

"Yes, it is over ; we must die ! Well, what matter, since we are alone in the world, and shall leave none behind to mourn our loss ! We will die !"

"We, dear love ?"

"Yes, *we* ; for I have neither the power nor the will to survive you, Cassinove."

"God give you both, sweet wife, with many years of earthly usefulness and happiness, after this restless heart and brain of mine shall be calmed in death."

"Ah, do not pray for it, Cassinove. All that enables me to endure this hour is the firm conviction that I shall not survive you."

The officers, who had considerably held back while this little by-scene was going on between the husband and wife, now advanced to remove the prisoner.

At Laura's urgent entreaty, Cassinove requested that she might be permitted to accompany him to the prison, and the request was immediately granted.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE FATE OF THE POISONER.

Thus even handed justice
Commends the poisoned chalice
To "his" own lips.—*Shakspeare*

AMONG the spectators in the court-room, who had awaited in the greatest anxiety the result of the trial, was the poor little dark-eyed woman, whom we have known as the Widow Russel, but who was, as has since been shown, the wife of the miscreant, Thugsen.

She had remained closely veiled, and carefully concealed in an obscure corner of the court-room, whence, unnoticed, she had watched the progress of the trial. When the verdict of the jury was rendered, it was *her* half-smothered shriek that broke the breathless silence of the room.

After the sentence of death was pronounced, and before the crowd began to disperse, she crept out, in a sort of horror of amazement, and bent her tottering steps towards Giltspur street, murmuring, as she went along—

"Guilty! Death! Oh, heaven! to suspect what I suspect; nay, to know what I know, and to let him die! To let him die—so young, so good, so guiltless! To let him die, when a word from me would save him! It would be murder! I should have *his* death and hers, too, for she would not survive him, on my soul! I, too, should be a murderer—should become a murderer by merely living with a murderer! Should catch blood-guiltiness as one catches the plague, from contagion! It must not be! I cannot rest as the *confidante* of crime! The innocent life shall not be sacrificed through me!

"But then, the unnatural horror of having to give information against—Oh, my God!—against the husband of my youth—the father of my children! But there is a law of righteousness above all the laws of nature, and that I must obey!

"This evening I will tell him all I know, and give him the opportunity of acting right! Then, if he does not, I must deliver him up to justice! I must do it! It will kill me, but I must do it!"

Those who saw her reeling along the street, and muttering to herself, thought her drunk or mad.

At length, half conscious of the suspicious glances turned towards her, the distracted woman stopped an empty hackney coach that was passing by, and entered it, telling the driver to take her to Berwick street. It was at some distance from the Old Bailey, in the densest, poorest, and most crowded portion of London.

She pulled the check-string, and stopped the carriage at the entrance of the street.

She alighted, paid the fare, dismissed the carriage, and proceeded on foot up the narrow and over-crowded street, until she paused before a tall, three-storied, red brick house in rather better preservation than those in its immediate neighborhood. She entered this house with a pass key, carefully locked the door, and turned to another door on the right of the front passage, that admitted her into a suite of three rooms; the front room being the bed-chamber, the middle room the parlor, and the back room the kitchen.

She laid off her bonnet and shawl in the front chamber, went into the parlor, and set the table for dinner, and then proceeded to the kitchen to prepare the meal, for there seemed to be neither servant nor child on those premises. This small, solitary woman, appeared to be the only denizen of this great, lonely house. Yet this was really not so; for when an hour had passed, there was the sound of a key turning in the lock of the street-door, followed by the entrance of a man, who fastened the door after himself, and advanced along the passage into the parlor, where the little woman stood cutting bread at the table.

"Well, Ruth, is dinner ready?" inquired the man, throwing his hat upon a side table, and sinking into an arm-chair.

"No, Robert; the soup will need to simmer half an hour longer."

"You've been out."

"Yes, Robert; I've been at the Old Bailey."

"And what the demon had you to do at the Old Bailey?" asked the man, losing somewhat of his habitual good temper and courtesy.

"I have been seeing a guiltless man tried for wilful murder; I have been hearing an innocent man condemned to die the death of a murderer!" said Ruth, solemnly.

"The deuce! The jury were quick about their work! Is he sentenced?"

"He is sentenced to die for a crime of which he is perfectly innocent."

"Innocent! innocent! what the foul fiend do you mean by harping upon that word? How the demon do *you* know that he is innocent?" inquired Thugsen, angrily.

"By knowing who is guilty," replied Ruth.

"How? What the d——! Oh, the woman has lost her wits!" exclaimed Thugsen, with a light laugh.

"No, Robert Thugsen, I have not lost my wits! Would to heaven that I had! I know what I am saying! I know that Cassinove is innocent of the crime for which he is condemned to die, by knowing too well who is guilty," said Ruth, solemnly.

"Who the demon, then, is guilty? Speak, woman—speak at once!" exclaimed Thugsen, desperately, starting up, and confronting her.

She arose from her seat, and stood before him as pale as death, firm as fate; and placing her hand upon his chest, and looking him full in the face, she said—

"Robert Thugsen, 'thou art the man!'"

He started back, appalled, as though the angel of destruction had suddenly risen before him.

He gazed upon the accusing spirit, faltering forth the words—

"How? What? how the demon could you know that?" Then suddenly recovering his self-possession, and with it his consummate hypocrisy, he burst into a loud laugh. He threw himself into a chair, exclaiming—

"Oh, you are mad! mad as a March hare! You shall have a strait-jacket and a shower-bath."

"Do not mock my words, or your own position," she said, sinking again into her seat. But as he continued laughing and rubbing his hands as in the highest enjoyment of an excellent jest, she resumed, gravely—

"Yes, I feel that you have a right to laugh me to scorn, a reason to despise me thoroughly, for you know that wherever you have been concerned, I have been culpably weak, so weak, indeed, as to suffer myself to be drawn into a labyrinth of deepest guilt, not, indeed, as an active agent, for that never could have been, but as an accessory."

"What can the fool mean?" interrupted Thugsen.

"I mean this. After the unnatural and nameless crime that shocked the whole civilized world from its propriety; that made you the outlaw of nature as well as of society; from the charge of which you fled the world for years, giving yourself out as dead; after all this I had the folly to receive you back again; yes, though at first I fled from you, as you had fled from your kind; though I hid my children from you, as I would have hid them from a lion or a leper; though fear, and horror, and loathing, struggled desperately with the old affection, yet when you sought me I received you back again, and in doing so plunged my soul in the deepest guilt, by loading it with all your subsequent crimes."

"*Crimes, woman!*" exclaimed Thugsen, sternly.

"Yes, *crimes!* You need not glare at me with that ferocious glance. I am not frightened; I am too far gone in wretchedness for that. The stings of conscience that goad me to speak as I do, and to act as I must, hurt me more than all you could say or do," said Ruth, with the firmness of despair.

"What crimes are there that you dare to impute to me?" demanded Thugsen, in the low, deep, stern tones of concentrated and suppressed passion.

"The assassination of Sir Vincent Lester, the cruel deception of the young Duchess of Beresleigh, the deadly peril of the guiltless Ferdinand Cassinove, about to die for your deed, and the awful sorrow of his innocent young wife. Heavily heavily presses this guilt upon my soul; and, Robert Thugsen I *must* cast it off. Justice *must* be done! the innocent *shall* be cleared!" said Ruth, solemnly.

While she spoke, his aspect gradually changed. With much effort he restrained his emotions, and assumed a calmness he was far from feeling. When she had ceased to speak, he said :

"You have charged me with these crimes. What reason or authority have you for doing so?"

"Your own words."

"My own words?"

"Your own words."

"What the fiend do you mean by that?"

"Robert Thugsen, the conscience that sleeps throughout the day awakes at night. When all your other senses are wrapped in forgetfulness, that sense of guilt remembers and raves."

"In other words, after a heavy supper, I have bad dreams, and mutter incoherent words in my sleep."

"Yes, you talk in your sleep."

"And upon the ramblings of an uneasy dream you would found a charge of guilt. Have *you* never dreamed of doing things that you really never could do—flying, for instance?" he inquired, disdainfully.

"Robert, your midnight ravings are not like the innocent fantasies of other dreamers. Nor is it only a vague 'shadow of guilt and scent of blood' that shrouds your nightly slumbers. No, each night you rehearse, again and again, all the horrors of that midnight murder!" cried Ruth, shuddering.

Thugsen could control the tones of his voice—but not the currents of his blood; but the deepening twilight of that sombre room concealed the unearthly pallor of his face, or the demoniac glare of his eyes, as he inquired, in a tone of assumed calmness—

"So I dream every night that it was *I* who murdered Sir Vincent Lester? And my dreams seem to be quite dramatic, worthy even of your accurate remembrance. Now *I* always forget my dreams, so that I should like to hear you relate this very remarkable one."

"It is too horrible!"

"What, the dream?"

"To hear you trifle so with such tremendous guilt!"

"It was but a dream, you know!"

"Ah!" she exclaimed, shuddering.

"You don't believe me?"

"No!"

"Tut! Come, draw up the curtain! let us see what this very dramatic dream is," he said, disdainfully.

"Oh! do not thus play with your crimes and their consequences. You pretend not to credit me, and you treat my words lightly! but you shall soon know better. You *shall* hear from my lips the dream in which each night you re-enact the tragedy at Lester House, revealing not only your acts, but your passions and emotions—your hatreds, fears, hopes, and purposes—speaking out what then you only thought and felt!"

"Come, this is the prologue! let us have the play," said Thugsen, ironically.

"Listen, then, Robert Thugsen," continued Ruth, in the tone and manner of one speaking under a powerful inward impulse. "Each night, in dreams, again you lurk around Lester House, hiding in the deepest shadows, and from your lair, like some wild beast crouching to spring upon its prey, you *watch* the *watch* until it has passed; then swiftly and silently you dart down the basement stairs; you examine all the doors and windows, and find one window carelessly left unfastened; you raise it and creep into the kitchen, closing it after you; you pause, watching and listening for the slightest sound or movement in that dark, still house; but hearing nothing, and believing all the household to be buried in repose, you draw from your pocket a bunch of well-filed skeleton keys, and creep up the stairs and along the passages; a single bolt or bar shot into its place would have arrested your progress, and saved *you* from crime and *him* from death, and you wonder as you steal along on your fatal errand that neither bolt nor bar obstructs your way; you do not know that the butler, whose last duty it is to secure the house, has not yet retired to bed, but is shut up in his office, casting up his accounts; oh, fatal carelessness! And so silently and breathlessly you glide like a serpent from landing to landing, until you reach the fatal chamber-door.

"You pause again, and standing breathless, there you watch and listen; all is dark and still without and within. You insert the key, silently turn the lock, and enter.

"How still the room! the only sound the ticking of the armolu clock upon the mantel-piece. By the dim light of the taper burning on the hearth, you see the closely-drawn curtains of your victim's bed. You creep towards it, and standing beside it, bend your head and listen; by the regular breathing of the sleeper you know that he is sound asleep; you push aside the curtain and look upon his face; it is a face full of care and sorrow even in its repose; he is lying on his right side, fronting you; his left arm is thrown up over his head; his motion has slightly disordered the bed-clothes, so that his left side is entirely exposed; there is nothing to shield his heart from your dagger's point; if the fiend had prepared the victim for the sacrifice, he could not have been readier for your hand.

"One blow and all will be over! *But* one or all will be lost! You clutch your dagger with a firmer grasp, and bend until you can hear the monotonous beating of that heart you mean to stop forever! You direct your dagger's point—one firm plunge and the deed of death is done!

"But the blow that kills first awakens! The wounded man bounds up! glares upon you with his dying and affrighted eyes—shrieks forth that alarm of 'murder,' that arouses the household! You fly! with the swiftness and silentness of the serpent you slip through the halls, glide down the stairs, and so effect your escape. Satan favors you, for as you emerge again from the kitchen window, the watch has just passed; *they* have not heard that smothered cry of murder; nor through the thick walls and closed shutters can they hear the hurrying footsteps of the roused household as it pours on towards the chamber of murder!

"You escape; you think your deed of darkness hid forever from the world; but, Robert Thugsen, I repeat, each night, when sleep has closed your eyes and sealed your senses, *conscience* awakes and re-enacts every minute scene of that tragedy, *speaking out*, what then you only thought and felt, as well as what you saw and did!" concluded Ruth, shuddering.

Could she have seen his face as she finished her narrative, she had not trusted her own life in his hands for another

hour; but the gathering shadows of night concealed it from her; and his tones were light and bantering, as he said—

“A singular psychological phenomenon! What else? That cannot be *all* upon which you found your opinion of my guilt?”

“It is enough; yet it is *not* all.”

“What more?”

“The dagger!”

“The dagger?”

“Yes, Robert Thugsen, the dagger that was found in Mr. Cassinove’s hand, but with which *you* had done the murder!”

“What the fiend are you driving at now? What about the dagger? come, what about it?”

“It was produced to-day in court; I recognized it; it was *yours*!”

“Upon my word, you are trying to get up quite a case against me. Any thing *more*?”

“Alas, yes!”

“Out with it, then! Let us have the whole at once. Never make two bites at a cherry.’ You, I think, have made ten at this, and have not finished it yet. Come, what more?”

“The sheath.”

“Oh, ha, ha, ha! this woman will certainly be the death of me! ha, ha, ha! First it was the dagger, now it is the sheath! Ha, ha, ha! Well, what about the sheath?”

“The night upon which you came to me at the cottage at Chelsea, you threw off your coat upon the bed-room floor. I took it up to hang it——”

“As you would like to hang its owner,” interposed Thugsen, with a sardonic laugh.

“As I raised it up, something fell from the pocket; I stooped to see what it was, and picked up the empty sheath of your antique Toledo poniard; it was crusted thickly with dried blood——”

“Why the demon did you not speak of it at the time, then?” interrupted Thugsen.

“Horror transfixed me. When I recovered the use of my faculties, fear for you sealed my lips.”

“Fear for me?”

"Yes, fear for you! Laura Elmer, as I told you, was my guest that night. Her suspicions were already aroused against you; she might have overheard any words that passed between us. So I hid away the tell-tale sheath, and should never have spoken of it again had not young Cassinove been convicted. Oh! Robert, the guiltless must not die for the guilty."

"Hush!" exclaimed Thugsen, with difficulty controlling his emotions. "From the accident of an empty dagger's sheath and a disturbed dream, you think that you have made out a very strong case against me; it is nonsense; but let that pass for the present. You have also charged me with the deception of the young Duchess of Beresleigh; now, what have I to do with the Duchess of Beresleigh, or the Duchess of Beresleigh with me?"

"You should have nothing to do with her, more than a spirit of darkness has to do with an angel of light; and yet you have twice cruelly deceived her."

"Explain yourself, Ruth; by my soul, I do not understand you."

"Thugsen, you have buried me here, in the obscurest part of London. I am as completely isolated in this crowded quarter of the town as though I were in the midst of the deserts of Asia or the forests of America. I speak to no person—I see no paper—and you think that I am therefore ignorant of what goes on in the great world; and so I am, to a great extent. But this morning a piece of an old newspaper fell into my hands. It came around a parcel that I had brought from the draper's. Your name attracted me to a paragraph, and there I read a short account of the charge brought against the young Duchess of Beresleigh."

She paused, and held her hand to her side, as though in pain.

"Go on," said Thugsen.

"I discovered by that account that you had cruelly deceived her twice. First, when she was a young girl, and you were hiding in her foster-mother's house, you passed yourself off for a single man, and attempted to consummate a marriage with her, a crime, the completion of which was

prevented by the timely arrival of the constables in search of you. And now, when years have passed, and she is the lawful wife of one of England's proudest peers, you, knowing that you have not the smallest shadow of a claim upon her notice, dare to demand her as your wife, and threaten her with a criminal prosecution if she repulses you. Of course you are aware that that high-born lady can know nothing of the poor, obscure woman, who owns the position into which you would force her, nor could you suppose that any accident would reveal the wrongs of the Duchess of Beresleigh to me."

Thugsen started, and walked once or twice up and down the floor; then pausing before her, and speaking with as much calmness as he could assume, he said—

"To whom have you gossipped of these matters?"

"To no one on earth."

"So help you Heaven?"

"So help me Heaven, in my dying hour."

"It is well; I believe you," said Thugsen, taking his seat near her, and continuing—"You seem to have taken the demon into your council, else I do not see how you ever contrived to amass such an amount of evidence against an innocent man, and that man your own husband. And now, what do you mean to do with it?"

"Nothing, Robert, until you have fled the country."

"And if I do not choose to fly from a false charge?"

"It will not be a false charge."

"But if I do not choose to fly?"

"Then your blood be upon your own head; for whether you fly or not, Robert Thugsen, I must do my duty. It will break my heart, but I must do it."

"What duty? How will you do it?" inquired the man, in a low, stifled voice.

"Listen. This is Thursday. Cassinove is ordered for execution on Monday. On Monday, also, the trial of the Duchess of Beresleigh comes on. I will give you until to-morrow evening to make your escape. You will have plenty of time to reach Dover, and take the boat for Calais. To-morrow evening I will place all the facts with which I am acquainted in the hands of the police."

"Ha! ha! ha! Why, even if the evidence were worth any thing, it could not be taken from you. You are my wife."

"I know, and my evidence against you could not be received in court, but I could give what information I possess to the police, and let them follow it up as they please. I *must* do this; it will kill or craze me, but I must."

"And this is your final resolution?"

"It is; oh, Robert, fly and save yourself! I have still a little money left; you can take it all."

"Come, I have had no dinner to-day, light the lamps and see to the soup."

With a deep sigh at his apparent insensibility, Ruth lighted a lamp and sat it upon the table, and then went out to attend to the dinner.

Thugsen made a turn or two around the room, muttering to himself—

"She knows too much; she knows too much; her own lips have spoken her own doom; it can be delayed no longer. Yet, poor Ruth! but she is so very wretched, that it would be a mercy to put her out of her misery, by some quick and easy process, especially as it *must* be done if I am to have Rose restored to me; yet I would have spared her as long as possible; spared her forever, if I could have smuggled her off somewhere. *Allons*, a wilful woman must have her way; it is her fault, and not mine."

Here he drew from his pocket a very small vial filled with a grayish-white powder, and muttering—

"I have had this quietus about me for the last ten days, without having the courage to administer it to the only one on earth that loves me. But now that very one, besides being the greatest obstacle to my worldly advancement, is, also, the most dangerous enemy to my safety. Her life or mine must fall. Well, self-preservation is the first law of nature. It will soon be over, she will not suffer much, and then—why, then I shall be at peace——" He suddenly ceased muttering, and closed his hand upon the little vial as he heard the approaching footsteps of his doomed wife.

Ruth came in, bearing in each hand a basin of soup. She

sat one down beside her own plate at the head of the table, and the other beside his, at the foot. Then she returned to the kitchen for something else.

As soon as she had left the room, Thugsen went to the table and poured the contents of the little vial into her basin of soup, saw the powder dissolve, and then immediately went into the adjoining bed-room to destroy the vial. He looked around, and seeing a hole in the plastering, dropped it through, where it fell into some inaccessible depth in the wall.

Meanwhile, he heard Ruth moving about the dining-room, and arranging the dishes upon the table. He paused a moment to compose himself, and then returned.

"Your dinner is quite ready, Robert," said Ruth, sitting down at the table.

He took his seat and commenced eating his soup. Presently he looked up at Ruth.

Ruth was looking down upon hers, and delicately skimming it, and dropping the scum into a waste plate.

"What is that?" he inquired, uneasily.

"Only a little dust of soot fallen upon my soup," she replied, beginning to eat.

He was re-assured. Soot was black; the powder he had poured into the soup was white, and besides he had seen it dissolve. He watched her eating. Poor creature! notwithstanding her troubles, she ate rather eagerly, for she was faint and hungry from long fasting.

"She enjoys her last meal without a thought that she partakes of it in her last hour. Well, after all, how much easier her death will be, than if she should live to die what is called a natural death—a long, painful illness, slowly wearing out her life. It will soon be over; I hope, even in that little time, she will not suffer much," thought Thugsen, as he watched her.

"You do not eat your soup; there is no soot fallen into yours?" inquired Ruth.

"No, there is *none in mine*," replied Thugsen, with a hidden significance, as he fell to and rapidly finished his soup.

Ruth removed the empty basins, and began to carve the roasted fowl that formed the next course. Thugsen watched her for some sign of approaching illness.

There was none as yet. Ruth finished carving, and set his favorite pieces before him.

"Are you not going to take any?" inquired Thugsen.

"No; the soup was quite enough for me; I felt faint and hungry when I sat down, but my appetite has gone off with the soup."

"You are not well," said Thugsen.

"I am as well as I can be, with the anxiety that oppresses my mind, Robert."

"Ah! you are still resolved to inform the police of what you suspect to-morrow?"

"Alas! yes, Robert! but not until you escape."

"I think you will *not*," said Thugsen, laughing defiantly; but in the midst of that laugh, his face turned pale, and a shiver passed over his frame.

"What is the matter?" said Ruth.

"A sudden qualm; you upset me with your diabolical nonsense: it is over now—bring in the pudding."

Ruth cleared the table, and went out into the kitchen to fetch the pudding. When she returned she found Thugson white and convulsed in his chair. She sat down the dish, and ran to him, exclaiming:

"Robert! Robert! what is the matter?"

"Ill, ill, ill to death!" gasped the sufferer, while a cold sweat bathed his pallid forehead.

Ruth poured out a glass of brandy, and held it to his lips.

"No! water! water! my throat is burning up!" whispered Thugsen, hoarsely.

Ruth hastily poured out a glass of water, and held it to him.

He drank it eagerly, swallowing with difficulty. It seemed to revive him for an instant; he sat up, wiped his brow, stared at Ruth with that confusion of mind that extreme pain and exhaustion produces, and exclaimed:

"Woman! what is the meaning of this? *You* are not ill!"

"No, Robert, only anxious."

"But I am! How is that?"

"I do not know, Robert. You talk, and act, and look so strangely. Come into your room and lie down, and perhaps

you will be better," said Ruth, gently taking his arm to assist him.

But a third and more violent fit of pain and shivering seized the man; his features were blackened and distorted, his limbs drawn up and convulsed.

Ruth was dreadfully frightened; she supported his head, and wiped the icy sweat from his brow. As soon as the fit passed, and he regained the power of utterance, he glared at Ruth, and shrieked:

"You have poisoned me! you have poisoned me! Murderess, you shall swing for it!"

"I—I—Robert? I poison you? But you don't know what you are saying—you are so ill. Come, let me help you to bed, and I will run for the apothecary over the way," exclaimed the terrified wife.

"Traitor! murderess! you have poisoned me, and you know it!"

"Oh, Robert!"

"Answer me, woman! what did you do to the soup while I was in the bedroom?"

"Nothing, on my soul and honor."

"Nothing? Think—answer, on your life, as you would answer on the last day! what did you do to the soup?"

"Nothing, as I hope for salvation! I changed the basins, but I never did any thing to the soup."

"You changed the basins!" cried Thugsen, in horror.

"Yes; when I came in I noticed, for the first time, that a little soot had fallen into yours, and knowing you to be very dainty with your eating, I changed the basins—giving you mine, and taking yours. You saw me afterwards, at dinner, taking the soot off."

While she spoke, he sat listening, with a face blanched by bodily pain, horror, and despair.

Ruth gazed at him in consternation, exclaiming:

"There was no ill in what I did, Robert, was there? I did it for your sake. Oh, Robert, what is the meaning of all this?"

"You have poisoned me! that is it—poi——"

His words, arrested by a spasm, were followed by convul-

sions so violent, that he fell from the chair, and writhed upon the floor.

Ruth dared delay no longer. She rushed from the house, and ran across the way, into the apothecary's shop, exclaiming :

"Oh, Mr. Jones, for heaven's sake, come immediately! I do fear my husband is dying in a fit!"

"Your husband? Who is he? Has he been drinking?" inquired the druggist.

"No, no; he fears it is poison! but it cannot be that, and I do not know what it is! Oh, do, pray sir, be quick! It is just over the way," cried Ruth, distractedly.

Mr. Jones took his hat, and immediately attended Ruth.

They found Thugsen extended on the floor, bathed in a cold sweat, and nearly speechless through exhaustion.

Mr. Jones knelt down by his side, and began to examine his condition, while Ruth, in an agitated manner, recounted the first symptoms of his attack.

"It seems a case of poisoning by strychnine, madam," said the chemist, rising.

"Yes, yes, it was in the soup; *she* prepared it," gasped Thugsen, with difficulty.

"I will return again immediately," said the chemist, leaving the room and hurrying over to his shop, whence he despatched his shop-boy to fetch a policeman. Then calling his assistant to attend him, he returned to the house, bringing with him the most powerful known antidote to strychnine.

With the help of his young man, he undressed Thugsen and put him to bed, when the convulsions returned with accelerated violence. As soon as these had left, and he was able to swallow, the druggist administered the antidotes, which procured the patient a short respite from acute suffering.

Meanwhile the shop-boy arrived with the policeman.

"Take that woman in charge, and see that she does not make her escape. I suspect her of having poisoned her husband!" said Mr. Jones to the officer.

"Me! me!" cried Ruth, in dismay.

"He charges you with much apparent reason, madam!

You alone prepared the dinner; he was taken ill after eating it, and before leaving the table. His illness is the effect of strychnine. You will, therefore, see the propriety of your being kept in restraint until the affair can be investigated," said Jones.

"But I am innocent; indeed, I am, sir. If he *has* taken strychnine, I cannot imagine how it could have got into the soup, unless—*Oh! my Lord!*" exclaimed Ruth, sinking into her chair, and covering her face with her hands, as a suspicion of the truth, for the first time, glanced into her mind.

"Officer, do your duty," said the chemist, coldly.

The policeman advanced towards Ruth.

She held up her hands deprecatingly, saying—

"Oh, do not remove me from this room! I am innocent. He is my husband; let me stay to watch him. I will not run away; indeed I will not."

"If you please, sir, I can take the woman into custody, and keep her in this room all the same," urged the policeman.

"Very well; see that she does not elude you and make her escape," said Jones.

And the policeman told Ruth that she was his prisoner, and must not leave the room, and then he took up his position at the door.

"He seems easier. Don't you think he may get over it, sir?" said Ruth, wringing her hands.

"Impossible to tell, ma'am. It will be a severe struggle between the powers of life and death. The very antidotes I am obliged to administer are terribly exhausting," said the cautious chemist.

As if to prove his words true, Thugsen was again seized with frightful convulsions. His face was black, and his frame horribly distorted.

"Oh, heaven, how dreadful! Had you not better send for more advice?" pleaded Ruth, weeping, and wringing her hands.

"I shall, if this continues, to save myself from the burden of a sole responsibility; but it is just as well to tell you that no one can do more for him than I am doing now," said Mr. Jones, preparing another dose. It was administered, and the patient again sunk into the quietude of exhaustion.

The night was now far advanced. By the orders of Mr. Jones, who took upon himself the direction of affairs, the house was closed up. The chemist's assistant and the shop-boy sat nodding in the adjoining parlor, to be ready in case they were wanted. The policeman leaned against the frame of the communicating door, and dozed upon his watch. Mr. Jones and poor Ruth sat, the one on the right, and the other on the left of the bed.

The quiet of the house was presently interrupted by the wild tossing and groaning of the patient, who presently fell into the most frightful convulsions, turning black in the face, foaming at the mouth, throwing his body into the most horrible contortions, sometimes in his fierce agony nearly throwing himself from the bed, and ever, as the momentary relaxation of the nervous tension permitted him to speak, breaking into the fiercest accusations against Ruth, or the most abject entreaties for mercy or for life.

"Oh, Jones, for the love of heaven, do what you can to save me. I am not fit to die. Ah, murderess, you shall pay for this! Oh, heaven, what tortures! Ah, wretch, this is your doings, and you shall not escape!"

Thus he revealed the agony of his body, and the anguish and terror of his soul, until the returning stricture of his throat for a time strangled out both speech and breath.

The poor wife and the apothecary both did all they could to relieve and soothe the suffering man. But these last convulsions were so much more violent and long-continued than any which had preceded them, and were followed by a fit of such deep prostration, that Mr. Jones could no longer hesitate to call in additional advice. He went into the adjoining parlor, and woke up his assistant, saying:

"You must go immediately and bring a physician—Dr. Clark, if possible. And you must also bring a magistrate. I fear very much that we shall have to get the dying deposition of this unfortunate man."

Young Benson quickly aroused himself, and departed on his errand.

Day was dawning as he left the house.

Poor Ruth, forgetting that she was a prisoner, got up to

open the windows and kindle the kitchen-fire to prepare for breakfast, but the policeman stopped her at the door. And when she explained the nature of her errand, the chemist told her that he would send his shop-boy to the next pastry-cook's, and have breakfast brought for the watchers.

And Ruth returned to her seat on the right of the bed, where she quietly remained for perhaps an hour, at the end of which time the whole party were disturbed by a loud knocking at the street-door.

Mr. Jones answered the knock, and admitted a magistrate, who said that he had come, in answer to a message left for him an hour ago.

Mr. Jones conducted Mr. Humphreys, the magistrate, into the parlor, and having seen him seated, related the facts of this poisoning as far as they had come to his knowledge.

"The suffering man is now reposing, and I think he had better not be disturbed just now. The suspected woman is also in his room, but in charge of a policeman."

"Send the woman in here. I would like to question her," said the magistrate.

Ruth came in at the summons and gave exactly the same account of her husband's attack of illness that she had given to the apothecary.

"How long has she been in your custody?" inquired the magistrate of the policeman.

"Since last night, sir."

"Then, if there is a secure room in this house, she had better be confined in it."

Mr. Jones undertook the survey of the upper stories of the house, and reported a comfortable and secure bed-room on the second-floor front.

And to this room poor Ruth was conducted and there confined.

Meanwhile the physician, Doctor Scott, arrived, and was shown into the chamber of death.

The patient was lying extended, in a state of deep prostration, with the cold sweat beaded upon his brow.

Doctor Scott looked into his face, felt his pulse, sighed, and, in answer to the eager, low-toned questions of the bystanders, said:

"He seems to be sinking fast."

Then the doctor wrote a prescription, and despatched the young chemist's assistant over to the shop to make it up. When this was brought and administered, the sufferer seemed to be temporarily revived.

"How are you, sir?" said the magistrate, approaching the bedside.

"I do not know! Oh, doctor! doctor! am I dying?" exclaimed Thugsen, turning his eyes, wild with excitement, upon the physician.

"Oh, no! certainly not; far from it," replied Doctor Scott, telling the professional white lie.

"Do you feel equal to giving any account of this attack of illness?" inquired the magistrate.

"Doctor, am I in any danger of death?" said Thugsen, turning again to the physician.

"By no means, my good friend," said the doctor.

"Can you give us any account of your illness?" persisted the magistrate.

"Yes; my wife and I had a quarrel. She prepared the soup; I ate of it, and immediately sickened. She, poor, erring creature, where is she now?"

"Confined in a room up-stairs."

"Keep her there, lest she do more mischief," said Thugsen, who, hoping for his own life, felt anxious that Ruth should be kept in confinement, lest she should put in execution her resolve to inform against himself.

"Are you willing to make oath to all you have said?" inquired the magistrate.

"Yes, for it is the truth," answered Thugsen, who soon after fell into horrible convulsions, that lasted fifteen minutes, and left him lying extended without sense or motion.

"I warn you, Doctor Scott, that if you think this man *in extremis*, you should inform him of his condition, that he may know it when called upon to make his deposition," said the magistrate.

"Sir, when the patient is *in extremis*, I will tell him so; until then, and while there is the slightest possibility of saving life, it is my duty to encourage him to the utmost," re-

plied the physician, who was now taxing all his medical skill for the help of the sufferer.

Breakfast for the watchers now arrived from the pastry-cook's, and interrupted farther conversation. A cup of coffee, a muffin and an egg, was sent up to Ruth. The policeman took them in.

"How is Captain Thugsen now?" inquired Ruth, as he entered the room.

"I am forbidden to hold any conversation with you, mum," replied the policeman, setting down the tray, and leaving the room.

And Ruth was abandoned to solitude and intolerable suspense. Troubles seemed gathering thicker and thicker over her head. Her sorrows seemed more than any human creature could bear. She fully understood now, how it was that her husband had taken the poison, which he must have prepared for herself; and awful gratitude to God for her almost miraculous deliverance from the snare, struggled in her heart, with grief for the man that she still loved, despite his crimes and cold-blooded villany, and fear for the consequence to herself and children, should Thugsen die, persisting in his charge against her. And these sorrows and anxieties for herself and her loved ones were mingled with others, no less acute, for Ferdinand Cassinove and his unhappy wife. The hours that were to lead them to the scaffold were swiftly passing away; and she who, possessing a guilty secret, might save him, must not breathe it because it would send her dying husband, from his death-bed to a gaol, and indeed, could not divulge it because she was confined under lock and key, and prevented from holding conversation with any one.

"Surely no sorrows were ever equal to my sorrows," cried Ruth, dropping upon her knees beside the bed, burying her face in the coverlet, and praying and sobbing by turns.

Meanwhile, as the day waned, the shadows of death gathered thickly around the wretched Thugsen. Medical aid had been unavailing except to ameliorate his acute suffering. Every succeeding fit of convulsion had been more violent, and followed by deeper prostration. The powerful organization that had held out so long against the action of the poison,

was beginning to show signs of speedy dissolution. The gray hue of death overspread his countenance, the damps of death condensed thickly upon his icy brow; yet his brain, like that of one dying under the effects of strychnine, was singularly clear.

From time to time he spoke as follows:

"Where is my guilty wife? Keep her closely confined. Let her talk with none."

He was always re-assured and soothed.

At sunset all hope of his life was abandoned even by the physician, who had "hoped against hope." He could no longer, in conscience, withhold from the wretched patient, the knowledge of his true condition. He bent over him, and whispered gently:

"Captain Thugsen——"

The sufferer flared open his eyes, and glared wildly at the speaker.

"Try to compose yourself, and if you have any worldly affairs to settle——"

"You think I am dying!" shrieked the unhappy man, starting up, and falling back exhausted.

"Life and death are in the hands of God," said the doctor, gently.

"You said I would not die."

"Nor would you, if the utmost human skill could avail to save you."

"Oh, it must—it must save me! I am not fit to die. Save me, doctor, save me!"

And here followed pleadings of the most abject terror and anguish of a guilty and cowardly soul on the brink of eternity.

The doctor administered a composing draught, and then said, gravely and sweetly:

"Captain Thugsen, the world has reported you, with what justice I know not, a great sinner, but this I would say to you, that there is mercy for the greatest. Use the short space that is left you, in making restitution, so far as you can, for any wrong you may have committed, and then turn for mercy to Him with whom time and space is as nothing, and sincere repentance the one condition of pardon."

"I cannot! Oh, I cannot!" exclaimed the wretched man, falling into the most frightful ravings of remorse and despair.

It was long before the united efforts of the physician and the magistrate could soothe his anguish.

"How many hours have I to live?" was then the question of the fast-sinking man.

"You may survive until morning; yet I would advise you to attend at once to any worldly business that you may have at heart, so that your last moments may be entirely given to the care of your soul," said the physician, solemnly.

"Then let every one leave the room, except the magistrate, who will hear my statement, and the doctor, who will reduce it to writing," said Thugsen, in a feeble voice.

The chamber was cleared as he desired. A small table was then drawn up beside the bed; a lighted lamp, a copy of the Holy Scriptures, and writing materials were placed upon it; and the physician and the magistrate seated themselves beside it.

The magistrate duly administered the oath; the doctor prepared his paper and pens; and Robert Thugsen, in a feeble voice, often sinking into utter faintness, commenced his statement.



CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE LAST HOURS IN THE CONDEMNED CELL.

Now, my best Laura, take my last embrace;
Come, be yourself, and hear me say farewell.
I leave thee with this truth, I have not words
To speak thy worth, nor to describe my love;
The extremity of grief I feel at parting
Is the best parallel to reach them both,
Farewell forever; now, adieu the world.—*Howard.*

WE must now return to Cassinove and his devoted wife, whom we left on their way to the prison.

On entering again its gloomy portals, the governor, instead

of conducting his prisoner to the clean, light, and airy cell he had occupied before his condemnation, led him through the intricate passages of the prison, until they reached the ward of the condemned cells that flank the press-yard—dark, dreary, desolate region, where so much guilt and remorse, terror, and despair, awe, and even innocence and resignation, had entered to suffer, and left to die.

Before one of these the governor paused, inserted a key which grated harshly in turning the lock, and conducted the prisoner into the gloomy cell whence he was doomed never to issue forth except to mount the scaffold.

This was the thought that seemed to press the life from out their hearts.

The judge, in pronouncing sentence, had forbidden them to hope. But the kindly governor, seeing the shrinking of their natures at this crisis, and thinking, perhaps, that a single grain of hope might prop instead of poisoning them, said :

“Keep up your heart, sir ; take comfort, ma’am. I know when a man enters one of these places he thinks it is all up with him in the world ; but, Lord bless you, it isn’t so. No one inexperienced in the ways of courts and prisons would think it, but really about one-half the prisoners who are condemned to death have their sentences commuted, and some get pardoned outright ; so hope on to the last, sir. While there’s life there’s hope, you know, madam.”

And so saying, Mr. Browning sat his iron lamp upon the stand, and looked around upon the cell.

It was smaller, closer, and darker than the one Cassinove had formerly occupied, and the narrow bedstead, stand, and chair, were constructed of the rudest materials.

From utter exhaustion, Laura sank into the chair, and looking at the governor, with beseeching eyes, said :

“How long may I be permitted to remain with my husband this evening, sir ?”

“Until the usual hour of locking up, madam,” replied Mr. Browning, in some surprise at the question.

Laura sighed deeply. She had hoped upon this trying occasion that she might be permitted to stay longer.

But the prison rules were very rigid.

"I will leave you with Mr. Cassinove now, madam, and when the hour comes I will send an officer to let you out," said the governor, leaving the cell, and locking the door behind him.

When they were left alone they looked into each other's eyes, and then poor, suffering nature overcame, for an instant, all her heroic resolution, and Laura threw herself upon the neck of Cassinove, and wept bitterly, crying :

"Oh ! is there *no* hope in this world ! Oh, that I could die for you, my beloved ! my beloved !"

He pressed her in silence to his bosom. He knew that all words would be vain while her storm of grief was raging. But when it had exhausted itself, and she was more composed, he seated her beside himself on the cot, and sought in every way, to soothe and comfort her.

"Dearest, it is only *death* at worst, a doom that all must meet in some form or another. And, after all, what matters the form ? Mine will be a quick and painless exit. Trusting in the advocacy of the Saviour, and the mercy of the Creator, I do not fear the death or the judgment that is to follow it. I fear only to leave my Laura alone in the world ; and if any circumstance could disturb my last hours on earth or follow me to the 'better land,' it would be the thought of my beloved wife, sorrowing without hope in the world. Oh, Laura, take courage for my sake."

"I will, oh, I will, dearest ! It was poor and cowardly in me to weep. I will weep no more. A few more hours and all our earthly troubles will be over forever ; a few more hours and we shall have crossed this dark and rushing river of death, and landed on the other peaceful shore 'where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.'"

"Dearest, do not talk of *your* dying. This is a bitter trial for you, I know ; the bitterest, perhaps, that a woman could be called to bear ; but you will have strength given you to bear up and live !"

"To live ! ah, to live for what ? I have but you ! When you are gone there is no creature on earth whom my life could make better or happier ! No, I cannot live ; I feel it in every sinking pulse of my heart and brain. That is

Heaven's great mercy to me that I cannot live! Oh, I will not fail too soon! I will see you over the dark river, beloved, and then—follow you."

They were interrupted.

The hour of closing the prison had not yet arrived, but the door was unlocked, and the governor, accompanied by the sheriff and under-sheriff, entered the cell. Upon seeing the prisoner's wife present, the sheriff seemed somewhat embarrassed, and said:

"Had not the lady better retire?"

The governor turned to Laura, and said:

"Will you oblige me by taking leave of your husband now, and withdrawing?"

"No, no! I claim your fulfilment of your promise, Mr. Browning, to let me stay with him up to the last moment before closing. Ah, sir, in mercy do not press me; we have so little time to pass together on this earth, that every minute is priceless!" pleaded Laura.

"But, it will be very painful to you," said the sheriff.

"Not more so than what I have already sustained and can yet endure," answered Laura, sadly but firmly.

"Speak to her, Mr. Cassinove," whispered the governor.

"My dearest Laura, be advised, and bid me good-night," urged Cassinove.

"Ah, do not *you* tell me to go, else I must, you know. Let me stay as long as I may, Ferdinand; and let the sheriff proceed with his duty—the nature of which I can well surmise. What you have to endure, I also can bear," said Laura, reseating herself by his side.

They urged her no more; but the sheriff, taking a document from his pocket, said:

"I have a very painful duty to perform, from witnessing which I would gladly have saved this lady. I hold in my hand the warrant for the execution of Ferdinand Cassinove, at seven o'clock, A.M., on Monday next."

And unfolding the warrant, amid the dead silence of the assembled group, he read it aloud to the prisoner.

Cassinove heard it with composure, and at its close bowed, still in silence.

The sheriff said that any privilege or indulgence, within the rules of the prison, would be promptly extended to the prisoner, upon his application, and, with a deferential bow to Laura, he called his satellites, and retreated from the cell.

When left alone again, the unhappy pair remained seated side by side, their hands clasped together in utter silence. No word had passed their lips since the reading of the death-warrant. Although by what had gone before, they were prepared for what was to come, yet the reading of the doom seemed to have stunned them into stillness. Cassinove was the first to shake off the spell and speak.

"My own brave wife! you bore the ordeal well!" he said.

"I will bear all the rest well, until all is over, and then—follow you!" said Laura.

They remained mutually comforting each other for some fifteen minutes longer, and then the turnkey came his rounds, and informed Mrs. Cassinove that she must withdraw for the night. And Laura took leave of her husband, leaving him alone in his cell, and returned to her own desolate lodgings.

Leaving Newgate, Laura threaded the narrow, dark and filthy courts and alleys of that miserable quarter, crowded as they were, with abandoned wretches of both sexes, and reached, at last, her own gloomy lodging-house, at the top of Skinner street, within sight of St. Sepulchre's church. On the opposite side of the street she saw a close-carriage, with a coachman, whom she thought she recognized. But, too much absorbed by her own anguish, she gave no thought to the circumstance, but entered at once her dreary lodgings, where no kind friend ever welcomed her, where she was always alone in her grief, as was the Divine Master in Gethsemane.

She crept slowly and feebly up the dark staircase to the landing upon which her room was situated. She saw a tender, subdued light, shining from the partly-open door, and her heart, broken down by sorrow, sunk with a strange foreboding of more misery, if more could come to one whose cup was already overflowing.

She timidly pushed open the door, and entered.

And the next moment she was clasped in the arms of Rose. Poor Rose was no philosopher, and all she could do now was to clasp her friend to her loving bosom, and sob forth :

“ Oh, my dear, dear Laura ! my dear, dear Laura ! my heart bleeds for you. Oh, may the Lord comfort you, Laura, for no human being can, I know ! ”

“ This is very kind, Rose, to leave your pleasant palace-nome, and come to such an abode of misery as this,” said Laura, in an exhausted voice.

“ Oh, did you think I could stay at home, knowing that you were alone, and suffering here ? Oh, no ; as soon as the news of the verdict reached us, I got ready, and ordered the carriage, and drove here. I have been here an hour. I knew you were at the prison, and I should have gone thither, but I thought you would prefer being alone with him this evening ; so I waited for you here.”

“ Bless you, Rose ! but the duke, did he approve of your coming ? ”

“ My dear husband ? Ah, I see you do not know him yet. Yes, he approved of my coming ; he thinks you should not remain alone here in this dread trial ; he made me promise to bring you back to Beresleigh House to-night, if I could persuade you to come. Do, dearest Laura ! You shall live as privately as you like ; not even a strange servant shall intrude on you, for I have sent for your own old maid, and your old footman, who both love you, and they shall serve you in your own apartments. You can have a close-carriage appropriated to your sole use, and so visit the prison as early in the morning as you like. It will be just as convenient for you to ride from Beresleigh House, as to walk from Skinner street, and will take no more time. And Mr. Cassinove himself will feel more tranquil when he knows you are among friends, for, Laura, you shall never leave us more with our consent ; you shall be our adopted sister, dearer than all other sisters. You do not answer me. Oh, Laura, consent, dearest,” pleaded Rose, pressing her friend to her bosom with nervous eagerness. They were, by this time, seated on the threadbare sofa, side

by side, Rose having her arms clasped around Laura, who answered :

“ I thank and bless you, sweet Rose, but I cannot avail myself of your loving kindness.”

“ Oh, Laura, don't say so ! Dearest Laura, take pity on me ; my heart is bleeding for your woes and his, and bleeding all the more, because—oh, heaven !—I feel myself so weak, so utterly powerless to give you any saving help. Ah ! let me do what I can, or my heart will break outright,” cried Rose, bursting into a passion of tears, and clasping closely the friend she longed to succor.

“ Sweet, loving Rose, ask your own woman-heart if I could bear to enter a home of luxury while my husband suffers in the condemned cell ? No, Rose, no ; the very desolation and wretchedness of my abode give me a sort of comfort,” said Laura, mournfully.

“ But if not for yourself, and not for me, for Mr. Cassinove's own sake, come with me ! *He* would be happier if he knew you were with us. It would remove the only earthly anxiety he can have, to know that you were safe, with dear friends, who would love you as a sister all their lives,” urged Rose.

“ Dearest child, your affection inspires you with very specious arguments, but they will not do, Rose. I must remain here, for here I feel in every respect nearer to my husband.”

“ Then you will *not* be persuaded to go with me ?” wept Rose.

“ No, my pitying angel, because I cannot ; but I bless you from my deep heart for your love.”

“ Very well, then ; if you will not go with me, I will stay with you,” said the young duchess, wiping away her tears.

“ Rose !” exclaimed Laura, in mournful astonishment.

“ Yes, I *will*, Laura ; I will, dear sister of my heart. I will stay with you all through these bitter hours to the very last. When you go to the prison to see Cassinove, I will be here to receive you in my arms when you come back,” said Rose, resolutely. “ And when all is over, I will carry you off to Beresleigh House, never to leave us more,” she added, **mentally**.

‘But Rose, darling, I must not permit you to remain here.’

‘But I *will*, Laura, do you hear!’ replied the young duchess, obstinately. Then suddenly changing her tone, she once more threw her arms passionately around her friend, and pressed her weeping to her heart, saying—‘Oh, you would not be so cruel as to rend me from you now, when you are in such bitter trouble; do not, Laura! To leave you so would almost be my death.’

‘But the duke, Rose?’

‘Oh, my dear husband permits his poor Rose to do just as she pleases, so that she pleases to do right. I had provided for this contingency. I told him if I could not bring you with me, I should remain with you.’

‘And he consented?’

‘Yes, for he knew it would make me ill to leave you alone in your sorrow.’

‘And can you think so much of me and my sorrows when you have so heavy a trouble of your own?’

A pallor like death suddenly overspread the face of the young duchess, as she murmured, in a frightened tone—

‘Yes, oh yes, I have not forgotten that; but I must not think of it—it will do no good; I must think of you. Oh, Laura, how pale and thin you are! how faint your voice is! You have utterly neglected yourself; you have taken no refreshment since the morning, have you?’

‘Nothing, but a glass of wine; I could not, you know.’

‘Then I must make you take something once—for *his* sake, Laura, that your frame may be strengthened for your duties to-morrow,’ said Rose, ingeniously, getting up to search the room, and inquiring:

‘Is there a bell in this dreary place? and who waits on you, dear Laura?’

‘The landlady,’ replied Laura, touching the bell that was at her own elbow.

The prize woman promptly answered the summons. Her sharp eye had noticed the ducal coronet upon the carriage, and the liveried servants that attended it, and she had guessed the rank of Laura’s visitor, though she was unable to surmise the cause of the visit.

"My friend, your lodger here is not well. Will you be kind enough to prepare a basin of strong beef-tea as quickly as you can?" said the young duchess.

"Certainly, madam, your ladyship—I mean your grace," answered Mrs. Brown, stopping a moment to swallow with her eyes the apparition of a living duchess in her dominions, and then courtesying and retiring.

"Beef-tea will be the best thing for you to take, dear Laura; it will give you the strength you need, and you can take that when you cannot force nature to receive any thing else."

"You shall do as you please with me, here, sweet Rose."

In due time the much-needed restorative was brought, and Rose gently obliged her exhausted friend to partake of it freely, after which she made Laura lie down upon the sofa, while she sat beside it.

"Now shut your dear eyes, and try to take some rest," urged Rose.

But not for an instant did those "tired eyelids" close upon those "tired eyes." Rose saw how it was, and said:

"Oh, if you cannot compose yourself to rest, dear Laura, speak, utter all that is in your heart; it is better than suppressing your feelings; any thing is better than lying there in silence, and gazing into vacancy with those awful eyes."

"Rose, Rose, he is to die at seven on Monday morning!" exclaimed Laura, wildly uttering the thought uppermost in her mind.

"*Sans peur et sans reproche*, he is not afraid to die or meet his Divine Judge," said Rose.

"But oh, to think that the miscreant for whose crime he suffers, walks abroad at large!"

"Do you suspect, then, who did the deed?"

"I *more* than suspect it. I know it in my heart of hearts. I caused the wretch to be arrested and examined before a magistrate, but there seemed to be no evidence to warrant the indictment of the guilty man, although there was sufficient to convict the innocent one."

"May you not be mistaken, then, dear Laura?"

Laura shook her head in bitterness of spirit.

"Who is it then, dear Laura, that you suspect of this crime?"

"One whose name is odious throughout Europe for an unnatural and monstrous deed, for which he is no longer in danger of justice, since Sir Vincent Lester, the only witness against him, is dead."

"You mean——" exclaimed Rose, catching her breath.

"Robert Thugsen. But what is the matter, dear Rose?"

"Oh, Laura, did you know—*did* you know this miscreant is my persecutor also?"

"No; you astonish me. I thought it was a Captain Rutherford, of the 10th Hussars."

"No; that was only the feigned name under which he tried to marry me. Shall I tell you all about it, Laura? Perhaps my narrative may throw some light upon your suspicions."

"Yes, dearest," replied her friend, hoping to learn some new fact that might, even at this late hour, save the guiltless.

Rose commenced, and related the whole history of her broken marriage, as she had already narrated it to the duke.

While she spoke, Laura raised herself up from the sofa, and gazed earnestly at the speaker, and when Rose had finished her own narrative, Laura said:

"And is this the man who dares to claim your hand, and start a criminal prosecution on his claim?"

"Yes. Is it not infamous?"

"It is imbecile. Oh, that we had had an understanding before. It would have saved you from much anxiety. I could have told you a month ago, what I tell you now. The man has a wife and children now living."

Rose gasped for breath, as she sprang nearer her friend, and gazed wildly into her face, exclaiming:

"Is this so? Do you know it of *your own* knowledge? Where is the woman?"

Laura sank back upon the sofa. She had spoken too quickly and too much—more than she could prove. She did *not* know of her own knowledge that Thugsen had a wife; she had only the word of the self-styled wife, who did not

even bear his name, and who had behaved very strangely in running away and hiding herself from pursuit.

"Speak, speak, dear Laura. Is this really so? Are you sure of it?" exclaimed Rose, excitedly.

"I believe it, though, perhaps, there may be a difficulty in proving it."

"Tell me what you know."

Laura related the history of her acquaintance with Ruth Russel, and described the interview with the landlady upon the evening when Robert Thugsen unexpectedly returned to the house.

"And the woman—where is she now?" cried Rose, excitedly.

"She disappeared with her children the next morning, and has not since been heard of. The man actually threw himself in the way of the warrant I had got issued for his arrest—to have the farce over,' as he said to the magistrate."

"But the woman?" persisted Rose.

"Has passed entirely out of sight. But you must tell the duke what I have told you, and the woman must be found, and the fact of her marriage proved."

They conversed some time longer upon the *ecclaircissement* of the evening, and then Rose, whose eyes were affectionately watching her friend, said:

"Laura, can you not sleep now?"

"I think I shall never sleep again in this world, dearest."

"Oh, then I must make you sleep—that is all."

And so saying, Rose summoned the landlady and despatched her to the nearest chemist to procure an opiate. While Mrs. Brown was gone, Rose, with her own hands, undressed Laura and made her go to bed. And when the landlady returned she administered the morphine, and soon had the satisfaction of seeing the wearied woman in a sound sleep.

Rose drew an arm-chair to the bedside, and, dressed as she was, seated herself in it, to a rest that was half watchfulness.

Several times during the night Laura started and shuddered throughout her frame, as though the consciousness of misery pursued her even in her dreams. But towards morn-

ing, she sank into a profounder rest, and lay as one dead for many hours.

At six o'clock Rose softly left her seat, extinguished the night-light, and opened the windows, to air the room. And Laura still slept the deep, deep sleep of exhaustion, the effect of many nights' vigilance.

By the time Rose had arranged her toilet, set the room in order, and resumed her seat by the bedside, Laura awoke with a start, looked around with a bewildered air, and exclaimed :

"Was it a dream?" Then, suddenly falling and covering her face with her hands, she groaned in the full memory of all her woe.

Rose went and stood silently beside her for a few moments, and then ventured to stoop and press a kiss upon her cold hands.

Laura immediately removed them from her face, and looked up, asking :

"What is the hour, dear Rose?"

"It is just seven, Laura."

"Just seven. And at seven, to-morrow—Oh, God! he has but twenty-four hours to live, Rose!"

"He has all eternity to live! Try to think of his immortality," said the young duchess, stooping and kissing her friend.

Then, leaving Laura to collect herself, she went and ordered breakfast.

When she returned, she waited on Laura with all the tenderness of a sister, bathing her face, combing her hair, dressing her with care, making her partake of the tea and toast, when it was brought, and, finally, ordered a cab to convey her to Newgate.

When the cab was summoned, Rose put on her own bonnet and mantle, saying—

"You must let me accompany you to the prison, dear Laura. I will not intrude. I will remain outside in the cab until I hear whether Mr. Cassinove is willing to see me. If he is, I will visit the cell for a few minutes; if not, I will return here and await your arrival."

"Dear Rose, the prison is not a proper place for you to visit; you have stepped very far out of your sphere to come to see me."

"Any place is proper for me to visit where my duty calls me. So say no more, dear Laura, for I will attend you."

Too despairing to contend, Laura yielded; and they went down-stairs together, and entered the cab. It was but a short drive to Newgate.

When they reached the prison, Laura left the young duchess in the cab, and entered alone. An officer in attendance conducted her at once to the condemned cell. When the door was opened, she saw Dr. Clark and the Rev. Mr. Watson sitting on the side of the cot, and talking to Cassinove, who was seated upon a stool.

Cassinove immediately arose, and seated his wife in the only chair.

The physician and clergyman stood up and greeted her with grave sympathy. And then, saying that they would return again in the course of the forenoon, retired, and left the unhappy pair together.

Both were more composed than they had been on the evening before. They had need to be calm, for what a day was before them!

The last day of Cassinove's life swiftly passing away.

After they had clasped each other's hands, and looked wistfully in each other's eyes and had asked and answered questions as to how each had passed the night, and Laura had told of the kindness of the young duchess, she added—

"Rose is waiting in the cab outside. She wishes to see you, if you have no objection."

"Certainly not, love; go, bring her at once, that I may thank her for her angelic goodness to you," said Cassinove.

Laura went to bring Rose. As the young duchess entered the portals of the gloomy prison, she involuntarily shuddered, and clung as for protection to Laura.

"Ah, if she trembles so at the entrance, how will she be at the sight of the condemned cell, and the man who is doomed to die?" thought Laura. But Rose was already engaged in controlling her feelings, so that by the time she had reached

the door of the cell, she was as calm and firm as Laura herself—only shivering slightly as she passed the grated door into the narrow and gloomy den.

Cassinove was standing up with a cheerful countenance to receive her.

"This is very kind; I cannot thank you enough for your goodness to my wife," he said, placing a chair for Rose.

"You have little to thank me for, because, in fact, she will not let me serve her."

"Oh, Rose," said Laura.

"I am sure, then, that you have served her in spite of herself," said Cassinove.

"I *would* do so, if I could. Mr. Cassinove, I do not come here on an empty visit, or only to take up a portion of the precious time that you two have to be together. I came with a purpose that is very near my heart." Rose paused, and Cassinove looked interested and attentive. Rose resumed, with some embarrassment, that soon, however, gave way before the affectionate candor and simplicity of her nature—"Mr. Cassinove, will you permit me to speak to you as I should if you were my brother? Thank you, I knew you would. It is of your wife that I wish to speak. She is your only source of anxiety now, is she not?"

"She is indeed, madam; but for the thought of my wife I could die content," said Cassinove, bitterly.

"Mr. Cassinove, Laura is to me like a dear sister, and more than a sister, for I love her more than any one in the world except one."

"You are the angel of her life, as she is of mine," said the prisoner

"Mr. Cassinove, if my position and hers were reversed, if I were in the same straits to which she is now reduced, I would throw myself upon her noble heart for sympathy, and feel sure of finding it. What I know Laura in such a case would be to me, I wish to be to her," said Rose, earnestly.

"I am sure that you will be all that the kindest friend can be to my bereaved wife," replied the young man, gratefully

"Yes, Mr. Cassinove, and after—after—when——"

The words seemed to suffocate her, for she could proceed no further

"When all is over with me," suggested the prisoner, in a gentle voice.

"When you are with God," said Rose, in a firmer tone, "then I would pray Laura to return with me to Beresleigh House, and share my heart and home forever."

Cassinove looked with reverential admiration upon her eloquent young face, but answered nothing as yet.

She continued—

"I fear it will be thought too presumptuous in me to ask such a thing of Laura; I should scarcely venture so much if I did not know that her greatest comfort will be found in doing good, and that her presence will be a great good to me."

"And—the duke, madam?"

"My husband understands the great blessing that Laura would be to me, and for that reason, as well as for the high esteem he has for her, he warmly approves the plan. He authorizes all that I have said, and more."

The doomed man looked from the earnest, fervent countenance of the young duchess, to the beautiful, pale face of his wife, and hesitated. Rose, seeing his embarrassment, hastened to say—

"Oh, Mr. Cassinove, I have already spoken to Laura. Do *you* also speak to her; she will not gainsay you. Persuade her to consent to share my home, and then leave her with confidence to my heart. To me and to my husband, she shall be as the dearest of our sisters."

"Ah, your sisters, madam—how would they receive my stricken one?" inquired Cassinove, turning a look of unutterable love and compassion upon his wife.

"With the warmest welcome, with the most respectful sympathy. All will study her comfort, from my noble mother-in-law down to me. We are a united family, Mr Cassinove. We think with one mind, and feel with one heart. Oh, believe it."

"Alas, madam, I have but words, and words are all too poor and vain to express how profoundly I feel your goodness."

"You approve my plan, and you will persuade Laura to agree to it?"

"My wife will require no persuasion to become your guest for a few weeks, and I shall be tranquillized to think that in the first days of her grief she will be in a safe haven, among dear friends."

"Laura, you hear?" exclaimed Rose, turning to her friend.

"Yes, I hear, sweet Rose," replied the pale woman. Then going to her husband, she asked, "Is this your will, dear Cassinove? Shall you be happier to have me so disposed of?"

"Yes, love, yes; it were ungracious and ungrateful to refuse so kind an offer. You will go to the Duchess of Beresleigh for a few weeks, until you have recovered the shock of this calamity. Afterwards, Providence will provide."

"She will never have the heart to leave me, I will love her so well," said Rose, rising, and gravely embracing Laura. Then looking at Cassinove, she said, "This is settled."

"It is settled," answered the prisoner and his wife in the same breath.

There was a pause, and then a sudden paleness overspread the face of Rose. She knew that she must not longer intrude upon the last hours of the condemned man and his devoted wife, but she felt all the horror of bidding a last farewell to a man doomed to die a violent death in a few hours.

For an instant the sudden and acute realization of all this overwhelmed her, the scene darkened before her eyes, the floor seemed to sink under her feet.

"Oh, I must not faint! I must not even be weak, I, who am required to support others," was the thought that called back her ebbing strength. She went up to Cassinove and offered him both her hands, saying:

"Mr. Cassinove, I need not tell you that I believe fully in your innocence; you know that I do. May the Almighty and All-Merciful support and comfort you! When I am out of your sight, I shall be on my knees in prayer for you. Good-bye."

"Farewell, blessed angel! may the richest blessings of Heaven descend on you and yours," said Cassinove, with deep emotion.

Rose turned to the prisoner's wife, saying :

"I shall come for you, Laura, at the hour of closing. Good bye for the present."

Laura rose to accompany her back to the hackney-coach, but outside the cell-door she met Doctor Clark, and consigned Rose to his care.

Meanwhile, Laura remained in the cell with her husband until the return of Doctor Clark and Mr. Watson, when she retired to let them speak unreservedly to Cassinove, while she herself went to seek an interview with the warden of the prison. On entering his office, she sat down, and, in a hesitating manner, preferred her mournful request to be permitted to remain with her husband on this last night of his life; but she was kindly, though firmly, informed that the rules would not allow her to do so.

Laura saw that entreaties and prayers would be of no avail to break these stern rules, and, in pale despair, she arose and left the office.

As Laura re-entered Cassinove's cell, she was surprised to observe that Mr. Watson was no longer there, but that an unexpected visitor, Colonel Hastings, was seated beside Cassinove, whose suddenly blanched face and fixed eyes betrayed the fact that he had received some unexpected intelligence that even in this day of doom had power to transfix him. Both the prisoner and the visitor were so deeply absorbed that they neither of them observed the entrance of Laura, who sank unnoticed into her chair. Colonel Hastings was saying :

"After the sudden death of my son, I hastened from Baden-Baden to do you this late justice. I found you on trial for life, and had no opportunity of communicating with you. I placed myself among the witnesses for your defence, and awaited the issue of the trial. After your conviction I saw that there was no time to be lost in trying to obtain the clemency of the Crown. I sought the minister immediately. I found the Duke of Beresleigh with him on the same errand of friendship, but we failed of obtaining his favor. This morning I obtained an audience with the King, and having preferred my petition, was bluntly refused and dismissed.

I next sought an interview with the Queen, and implored her intercession, but in vain, for neither pardon, commutation, nor respite could I get. In despair I returned home, and thought that I would let the matter drop, as the revelation at such a crisis would avail nothing. But then an irresistible desire to confess every thing, and obtain your forgiveness, brought me hither."

"It is very, very bitter—say nothing to *her* of this until it is all over; to know it now would only increase her distress; whereas the knowledge a few days hence might have a beneficial effect upon her spirits. Now, if you please, Colonel Hastings, bring me those documents of which we spoke, and an able lawyer at once; I have but little time to attend to some necessary forms; the rest must be left to your management."

"If I live I will do all I can towards making restitution," said the colonel, rising to leave the cell, and seeing for the first time that the wife of the prisoner had entered.

"Good-morning, Lady—I should say, Mrs. Cassinove. You see here one dying man come to ask pardon of another," said the colonel, solemnly, as he bowed and left the cell.

And indeed his very decrepit appearance seemed to warrant his grave words.

As soon as he was gone, Laura spoke:

"I must not deceive you, Cassinove. I have been here some minutes, and I overheard the conclusion of your interview with Colonel Hastings."

"And you have learned——"

"Nothing, but that something has been concealed from me."

"Only for a few days, dear one, then you shall know all. And then—you will try to bear up and live for my sake?"

She turned on him a look of unutterable affection, and gave him her hand.

They were soon interrupted by the return of Colonel Hastings with a lawyer.

"Retire for a little while, dearest. I must see the gentleman alone," said Cassinove.

And Laura left the cell, and took her seat upon a bench in

the passage outside. She looked up and saw one of the officers of the prison approaching. She asked him what o'clock it was.

"Gone three."

Gone three! and she must leave him forever at six. Only three hours left, and those men taking up the precious time!

While she sat there with her life-powers ebbing away, Dr. Clark and Mr. Watson came up. The worthy physician and the good pastor had been in attendance upon Cassinove the greater part of the day. They looked surprised to see Laura sitting outside; but she explained to them that her husband was engaged with his lawyer.

The clergyman sat down beside her. Dr. Clark took her hand, and looked into her face, and then hurriedly walked away. He returned in a few minutes with a glass of wine and a biscuit, of which he forced Laura to partake.

At that moment, also, the cell-door opened, and Colonel Hastings and the lawyer came out. They bowed in passing, and immediately left the prison.

It was now past four o'clock; in two hours more Laura must bid her husband a final adieu. She re-entered the cell, accompanied by her two old friends, to pass those two precious, awful hours in his company. They found Cassinove grave and collected. He greeted his friends calmly, and then drew Laura to his side, and sat with her hand clasped in his. Oh, the clasp of that loved hand, so soon to be convulsed in a violent death! Oh, the glance of those loving eyes, so soon to be closed forever! The thought was suffocating, maddening to her. All the suffering of the last few dreadful days had failed to prepare her for this hour of supreme agony. She felt that sudden death or insanity threatened her, that heart or brain must instantly give way. She breathed a silent, agonized prayer, for help and strength. Mr. Watson noticed her increasing agony, and knowing the efficacy of Divine consolation in such extreme cases, he proposed that all should kneel and unite in invoking it. They knelt, and the venerable clergyman poured forth his soul in earnest prayer for the doomed prisoner, and for his most afflicted wife.

They arose from their knees strengthened to endure. And though her brain still reeled, and her heart still bled, Laura felt that she could now retain life and reason through the anguish of the hour.

Mr. Watson signed to Doctor Clark, and said :

“Cassinove, we will leave you together now until the hour of closing, then we shall return, I to pass the night with you, and the doctor to receive your wife. Be firm, dear friends ; continue to call on ‘Him who sounded the depths of human woe’ to be your stay and comfort. Remember that this parting is but for a little time. Life at longest is but a span ; and your re-union hereafter, in the better land, will be for all eternity.”

And so saying the good pastor pressed the hands of Laura and Cassinove, and beckoned Doctor Clark to follow him from the cell.

“They have little more than half an hour ; let them pass it together,” said Mr. Watson, as soon as they were out of the cell.

Nor will we, reader, intrude upon a grief so sacred. We will remain with the clergyman and the physician in the passage, where they passed the sad interval in pacing up and down before the closed door of the cell, until an officer of the prison advanced and told them that the lady who had been there in the morning had returned in her carriage, and was waiting to receive Mrs. Cassinove.

Doctor Clark went immediately to receive Rose, and conduct her to the door of the cell.

The pallid brow and dilated eyes of the young lady betrayed the sympathetic sufferings that she would willingly have concealed.

“Can you bear this, madam ?” anxiously inquired Doctor Clark.

“Yes, yes ; ‘as my day is, so shall my strength be.’ Is it not so, Mr. Watson ?”

“Yes, dear madam, so may you prove it,” replied the minister.

She needed all her strength now, for the great crisis of suffering had arrived.

The governor of the prison came up, saying :

"It is six o'clock, Mr. Watson. Will you be so good as to go to the prisoner and tell him so, and bring his unhappy wife. It seems a cruel thing to part them to-night, but in such cases the iron rule is the most merciful."

Mr. Watson bowed, and slowly and sadly entered the cell.

Cassinove and his devoted wife were standing together, his arm supporting her form, her head resting upon his breast

"Is it time?" he inquired.

"It is time," replied the minister.

"The hour has come, love," said Cassinove, stooping and whispering to his wife.

She raised her head, and fixed her eyes upon his face with a long, long gaze, threw her arms around him again, and clasped him to her heart with the strength of despair, as though her frail arms could have held him away from the whirlpool of fate that was drawing him from her. She muttered incoherent, gasping phrases, of which nothing could be distinguished but the words—

"Oh, must I—must I go, even now? God bless you, love! Farewell! farewell!"

"God be with you, my own true wife! Farewell!" said Cassinove, gently disengaging her arms from about his neck, and giving her to the charge of Mr. Watson.

The good minister supported her from the cell. She was white, cold, and sinking; her life seemed ebbing fast from her. But the forethought of Doctor Clark had provided for this emergency. They sat her down upon the bench beside the young duchess, who tenderly supported her fainting form, while the doctor bathed her face in spirits of camphor.

Then, after a few minutes, supported on one side by Doctor Clark, and on the other by Mr. Watson, and attended by Rose, she was taken to the carriage. Rose got in first that she might receive Laura, who was placed, more dead than alive, in the carriage. Rose received Laura in her arms, and supported her on her bosom, and the order was given to drive to Beresleigh House. No word broke the stillness of that ride. Rose could not mock that awful sorrow with any commonplaces of consolation.

When they reached the Beresleigh House they found Doctor Clark there awaiting them. He had thrown himself in a hackney-coach and preceded them, to attend upon Mrs. Cassinove, whose condition, he foresaw, would require his utmost medical skill.

Laura was lifted immediately from the carriage, and conveyed to bed in the sumptuous chamber prepared for her, where she lay insensible to all that was passing around her, looking more like the dead than the living.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE CHAMBER OF REST.

All is ended now, the hope and the fear and the sorrow,
All the aching of heart, the restless, unsatisfied longing;
All the dull, deep pain, and constant anguish of patience.
* * * *

LAURA had not spoken since she had been brought to Beresleigh House. All night long she lay senseless and seemingly without life. Doctor Clark and Rose watched beside her till long after the sun had risen.

At length the doctor arose, and coming around to the side of the duchess, said :

"You may retire to rest now, my dear madam. The last earthly troubles of Ferdinand Cassinove are over."

Rose looked up in wild affright.

"It is past eight o'clock; he died, you know, at seven."

Rose with difficulty suppressed a shriek, although the news gave her inexpressible relief, for she thought—

"His soul is no longer agonized on earth; it is at peace with God."

"You will do well to retire to rest at once. I expect Mr. Watson here very soon. He promised, you know, to remain with Cassinove until all should be over, and then to come and bring his last words to his wife."

"Then I will stay till he comes, and I see how my dearest Laura bears it," said Rose, resolutely.

Laura's condition seemed to change; from time to time she partially opened her eyes, and moaned as one in intolerable pain. At last she spoke :

"Oh, the long, long night—the long, long night—how does he bear it?"

At this moment there came a gentle knock at the chamber door. Mrs. Maberly went to open it. A servant appeared, who delivered a message, and retired. Mrs. Maberly came back to the doctor, and in her turn whispered :

"The Reverend Mr. Watson, if you please, sir, is downstairs in the library waiting to see you."

The doctor nodded, and then looked anxiously at Laura. She seemed to have sunk back into apathy. He felt her pulse, and then, with a sad shake of the head, laid the pale, attenuated hand down upon the bed, and arose and glided from the room.

He went softly down the stairs and opened the library door.

Mr. Watson advanced to meet him ; they shook hands in silence, and then the doctor said :

"You have come to tell us that it is finished."

"No—look there," replied the clergyman, drawing his friend towards a gentleman who stood at the window with his back towards them.

This gentleman turned around, and when the doctor raised his eyes, he stood face to face with——

FERDINAND CASSINOVE !

Yes, with Ferdinand Cassinove, who, holding out his hand, exclaimed, in a broken voice :

"My wife ! how is she, doctor?"

"Great heaven of heavens ! Cassinove ! alive ! escaped !" exclaimed the doctor, beside himself with astonishment.

"*Pardoned*, fully and entirely pardoned, for—a crime that he never committed," replied the clergyman, gravely.

The doctor turned and met Cassinove's dark eyes, and grasped his hands in speechless joy, that presently found expression in a burst of manly tears.

"But how is this? What moved the Minister? Tell me all about it?"

"What moved the Minister was the attested confession of the wretch who really *did* commit the crime, and who has now gone to answer for it. Cassinove, the guiltless victim of circumstantial evidence, was to have suffered at seven o'clock this morning. At seven o'clock this morning Cassinove was free, and Thugsen, the threefold murderer, was dead by his own hand!"

"For heaven's sake, how was that?" inquired the greatly-agitated doctor.

"I will tell you all by-and-by. The attested dying confession of Thugsen was in the hands of the Minister last night; but for the abominable routine, Cassinove might have been free last night, and we all have been saved twelve hours of anguish. The pardon was placed in the hands of the sheriff at six o'clock this morning. An hour later and a legal murder had been committed. There, that is all I can tell you now, for I see that Cassinove is anxious that his wife should be comforted."

"My wife! how did she pass the trying night? How is she this morning?" inquired Cassinove.

"She passed the night in patient, silent anguish; this morning she may scarcely be said to live. But do not be alarmed; the news that I shall presently carry her will bring back her life. Yes, Cassinove, this is my firm conviction, that if you had died this morning, she would not have survived until night."

"Oh, good friend, will you not go to her immediately, and break this news to her, and prepare her to see me?" said Cassinove, turning anxiously to Mr. Watson.

"Patience, my young friend; I must consult her physician first. Will it not be dangerous to communicate this intelligence in her present exhausted state, Doctor?"

"No; I certainly think not; it is just the sort of shock she requires to bring her back from the borders of the grave."

"But the dangerous effects of sudden joy?"

"Circumstances alter cases. The sudden joy that would kill a person in the full possession of their health and strength, would only electrify to new life one dying of grief.

It is the principle of the antidote, sir—the principle of the antidote. So come with me, if you please, Mr Watson, to Mrs. Cassinove's bedside. Come, Cassinove," said the good doctor, leading the way up-stairs.

When they had reached the chamber door, the doctor paused, and said—

"We must use caution in applying this electric shock, however. You two had better remain outside a few moments, until I go and prepare her."

We will draw a veil over the awaking of Laura from her stupor, and the agonized joy of meeting with her husband. As soon as she had sufficiently recovered her self-possession, Cassinove, with his form dilated with pride, and his eyes beaming with joy, informed her that she was again the Baroness of Etheridge, and that the title came through him. *That* was the secret which Colonel Hastings had communicated to him. He was no longer Ferdinand Cassinove, but Ferdinand Etheridge, the son of the late baron and Mary Coke, the beautiful daughter of his gamekeeper, whom he had married before running away with her. After his second marriage, (with Rose's mother,) he had hesitated to own his son; but on his death-bed he had told the whole story to Colonel Hastings, placed the necessary documents in his hands to establish its truth, and requested him to see that his darling boy was put in possession of his rights. Hastings had betrayed his trust, for the sake of aggrandizing his son; but all his plans had been thwarted by Providence, and the terrible death of Albert had at last brought him to repentance.

"Will you value the rank and title the less because you must receive it from me?" inquired Cassinove of Laura, in a voice that was every moment becoming more agitated. "You gave me your hand in marriage when I was a poor prisoner in Newgate, with no fortune to endow my bride except sorrow, danger, and ignominy. And now, Laura, now, I come to you with vindicated honor and with the power of replacing on your brow the lost coronet of Swinburne! And oh! my Laura! this is a power for which I would have bartered—Heaven forgive me—I had nearly said my soul!

For never did earthly saint love heavenly angel with a purer and more fervent love than that which my heart has lavished upon you from the first moment my eyes fell upon your face. From that moment, your welfare and happiness has been my one aspiration—my one prayer! And if fortune had offered me a choice of her best gifts, I would, above all others, have chosen this privilege of restoring you to your rank and title—this privilege that I would have purchased with my life! Oh, my dear Laura! say that you do not value the old barony less now that you receive it from me, than when you believed it yours in your own right.”

“No, no, I value it a thousand times more as your gift! I love to owe every thing to you. But is this all true, beyond doubt?” inquired Laura.

“Beyond the possibility of doubt. I have the names and addresses of the minister who married my parents, the physician who attended my mother, the chaplain who baptized me, the nurse who took care of me, the guardian who succeeded her, and, finally, I have the personal evidence of Colonel Hastings.”

“Oh, how does Colonel Hastings justify his long silence as to your position and rights?”

“He does not even attempt to justify it. If ever I saw a man broken down by disappointment, sorrow and remorse, it is Hastings. He was not naturally a very bad man, but a very haughty and ambitious one, and he was tempted by the prospect of a great fortune, and the reversion of an old barony to his own family.”

They were interrupted by a rap at the door. Cassinove, or Lord Etheridge, as we must now call him, opened it.

Mrs. Maberly stood there to inquire whether “her ladyship,” as she had never ceased to call Laura, would have breakfast served in her chamber, and whether Mr. Cassinove would join the family at the breakfast-table. He replied that he would breakfast with his lady, if they pleased; and soon after an elegant little breakfast was served in their room.

At noon that day Lord and Lady Etheridge sought an interview with the Duke and Duchess of Beresleigh. They met in the library, and when the doors were closed and they

had seated themselves around the central writing-table, Lord Etheridge laid before the Duke of Beresleigh a packet of documents that he requested him to examine.

The duke, in some surprise, took up the packet, and looked over the papers carefully one by one. Rose, entirely ignorant of what was to come, awaited in perplexity the issue of the investigation.

Ferdinand and Laura anxiously watched the countenance of the duke, which, as he picked up and read one document after another, exhibited much astonishment, but not a shade of grief or displeasure. When he had finished and laid down the last one, he arose, with a cheerful smile, and extending his hand across the table to Cassinove, shook hands with him cordially, saying :

“Let me be the first to congratulate you upon your accession to your title, Lord Etheridge.” Then turning to his astonished wife, he continued : “And let me congratulate you, also, my dearest Rose, for you have gained a brother. Ferdinand, embrace your sister, while I salute my dear sister-in-law.”

And going around the table to Laura, he took her hand, and kissed her cheek, saying :

“I wish you a long enjoyment of your recovered possessions, my dear sister.”

Rose, who had received the embrace of her brother, now turned and threw herself in the arms of Laura, exclaiming :

“Oh, my dearest, I am so, so happy ! happier than I have ever been in my life before, for I always felt like the usurper of your rights.” Then suddenly remembering that the vast estates gained by Ferdinand and Laura were lost to the Duke of Beresleigh, Rose turned pale, dropped the hand of her friend, and walked away to the distant window.

The duke instinctively surmising the cause of her agitation, went after her, and putting his arm around her waist, drew her to his side, saying tenderly :

“How is this, my darling Rose ? What distresses you ?”

“Oh, Beresleigh, it is as I said : I always said that my possession of the Swinburne estates would be transient ; and when Colonel Hastings threatened to produce the rightful

heir, I more than half believed that he could do so ; and even sometimes thought that the alleged heir might be the son of my father's first marriage with that beautiful girl that he took to the Continent. And even so you see it has proved."

"Well, sweet Rose, are you not very glad that this son proves to be our young friend Ferdinand, the husband of our dear Laura, who is by this means once more in possession of her rank and title?"

"Oh, yes! as far as I am concerned, I am, or I *should* be very, very happy ; but oh, Beresleigh, to think that *you*, when you supposed you had married a richly-dowered baroness, had wedded only a penniless maiden !"

"But the very sweetest maiden that ever was made a wife ; and the loveliest wife that ever man was blest with ! Sweet Rose ! dear Rose ! could you believe that *any* circumstance could make me prize and love you less ? No, darling of my heart and eyes, you are and ever must be to your husband a treasure beyond price," said the duke, with deep emotion.

Rose turned on him a smile radiant with gratitude and joy.

"Besides, dearest, you are very far from having been the penniless bride you described. You surely forget that you are, in the right of your mother, still the possessor of Laurel Hall, in Norfolk, and Forest Park, in Kent, two estates that, taken together, are quite equal in value to Swinburne."

"Oh, so I am ! I had quite forgotten that my mother's estates must descend to me. I had taken it for granted that, as the inheritance came to me as a whole, it must go from me undivided. Oh, I am very glad I have my mother's fortune for you, dear Beresleigh ; for now I can rejoice freely with dear Laura and Ferdinand."

"Then come and rejoice with them at once, dearest. And let us have some champagne, and drink the health of the new Baron and Baroness Etheridge," said the duke, drawing her arm within his, and leading her back to the table, where they rejoined Laura and Ferdinand.

One week from that day, a large party was assembled in the sumptuous library at Beresleigh House. It consisted of the Duchess Dowager and the young Duke and Duchess of Beresleigh, the Baron and Baroness Etheridge, the widowed

Lady Lester, and her son, Sir Ruthven, Colonel Hastings, and lastly, poor Ruth Russel.

They were brought together by a common interest in the confession of Robert Thugsen, through whose atrocious crimes nearly every one present had deeply suffered.

The confession of a notorious criminal is not a pleasant subject for review in detail. Yet it is due to the reader to throw some little light upon the early career of this man.

Robert Thugsen was the unacknowledged son of a nobleman in one of the central counties of England, and had a legal right only to his mother's family name. His father had purchased him a commission in the army, where the hereditary vices of the young man rapidly developed themselves in a career of profligacy which ended in his dismissal from the service.

Disgraced and impoverished, but still handsome and fascinating, he eloped with the only daughter and heiress of a wealthy manufacturer in Leeds. The deeply-wronged father sent his erring daughter a thousand pounds, but refused ever afterwards to see her or her profligate husband, and dying two years afterwards, left the whole of his property to his patron, Colonel Hastings. Captain Thugsen having spent his wife's small dower, and being disappointed of the fortune, and weary of the woman whom he had married only for her money, soon abandoned his wife and children, leaving them in obscure lodgings in London, and betaking himself to the fashionable watering-places, where his handsome person, fascinating manners, and ready cunning, enabled him to get on in certain sets.

At these places he always passed as a single man, and upon occasion changed his name. It was at Brighton that his first real passion led him into his first great crime.

Here he first met the family of Sir Vincent Lester, and with them Mrs. Ravenscroft, a young and beautiful widow, the sister of the baronet. She was known to be engaged to Lord Earlington, an old and broken-down bachelor, whose enormous unincumbered fortune had tempted her family into persuading her to accept his proposals of marriage. From the moment Captain Thugsen met Mrs. Ravenscroft, he re-

solved to win her love. The circumstance of his own marriage seemed of no more importance than the fact that she was the betrothed of another. Indeed, to a man of Captain Thugsen's disposition, those impediments only added zest to the pursuit of the lady. In a word, he won the passionate love of this modern Helen. The lovers met in secret, and took long walks on the loneliest part of the beach.

Thugsen urged her to fly with him to the Continent, but Helen was scarcely prepared for such a desperate measure. She said that if Lord Earlington were only out of the way, she would consent to become the wife of Thugsen. She never dreamed of the deep depravity that could put a fatal construction upon her words, and dare to obey their supposed meaning. At this time Lord Earlington, whose suspicions had been aroused, wrote a civil note to Thugsen, requesting the latter to afford him a private interview at his earliest convenience. Thugsen smiled with demoniac pleasure at the receipt of this note, and wrote a reply, requesting Lord Earlington to meet him at sunset in a certain secluded coombe in the downs.

Lord Earlington kept the tryst, and Thugsen, awaiting him in that solitary spot, sprang upon him, and buried a dagger to the hilt in his breast, and it was only then, from the lips of the dying man, Thugsen learned that Lord Earlington was his father, who, in a late repentance, had sought that interview with the purpose of acknowledging his son, yielding up Helen to the latter, and endowing the young couple with a portion of his large fortune.

Transfixed with horror, Thugsen could only stand and gaze upon the face of his dying parent until he was aroused by the appearance of Sir Vincent Lester, who, having followed the hounds all day, just chanced upon this encounter.

The baronet, who saw at a glance what had happened, and who, indeed, had been a witness to a part of the conversation, summoned Thugsen to surrender, and accompany him back to the town. But Thugsen sprang into his saddle, and fled with the sin of parricide blackening his soul!

With the after-part of this criminal's career, the reader is already acquainted

Sir Vincent had the body of the murdered peer conveyed to Brighton, where, upon his person, was found the note of Captain Thugsen summoning him to the fatal tryst. Helen Ravenscroft was informed of the death of Lord Earlington, by the hand of Captain Thugsen, and though she never knew the relationship that existed between the murderer and his victim, and that her lover's soul was blackened by the awful crime of parricide, yet from hearing of the crime, and the flight of Thugsen, she lost her reason, though, alas ! she never lost her mad passion for the criminal. With the cunning of partial insanity, she listened until she learned that her brother possessed the note of Thugsen that had summoned Lord Earlington to the meeting. With the cunning of the maniac, she watched her opportunity, and stole this note, and awaited until she found a way of putting it into the possession of Thugsen, which she did by throwing it to him from the carriage-window while she was driving in the park.

Upon learning this fact, Sir Vincent Lester had deemed it expedient to enlighten the unhappy woman upon two points—firstly, that he himself was the witness of Thugsen's crime; secondly, that the crime was not ordinary murder, but damning parricide! Upon hearing this awful disclosure, Helen became a raving maniac, and was conveyed to a lunatic asylum, where she soon after died.

These facts were gathered, partly from the confession of Thugsen, and partly from the statements of the parties present in the library.

Several practical goods resulted from these disclosures: first, Colonel Hastings refunded to Ruth Russel, or Mrs. Thugsen, as she should be called, the property of her father; secondly, the proven fact of Thugsen's first marriage showed his attempted second marriage to be an imposture, and vindicated the honor of the young Duchess of Beresleigh.

The trial before the House of Lords might have been arrested, but the friends of the young duchess deemed, at least investigation of that affair by that high tribunal essential to the triumph of right. Consequently, upon the appointed day the trial came off, and resulted, as every one foresaw, in the

triumphant vindication of the fair fame of the Duchess of Beresleigh ; for the decision of the peers was accompanied by the strongest censure of the parties who had charged her grace upon such trivial grounds, and the highest eulogium upon the character of the young duchess as it had been revealed to them through the investigation.

Thus the result of that trial was a most triumphant vindication of the honor of the Duchess of Beresleigh.

Lord and Lady Etheridge had only remained to see the end of this investigation, and to congratulate their sister and brother upon its happy conclusion, before they set out upon a late bridal tour over the Continent.

They were absent three months, and at the end of that time they returned to England, and sent their servants down in advance to prepare for their reception at Swinburne Castle.

The people of Swinburne, let it now be confessed, had never been reconciled to the change of local dynasty that had given them the laundress's daughter as their liege lady. They had never believed in the claims of Rose, and had always looked upon her as an usurper.

When, therefore, the servants of *their own* Lady Etheridge arrived at the Etheridge Arms with the intelligence that their lord and lady were coming down to the castle, nothing could exceed the joy of the villagers and tenantry.

The same group that had assembled two years before at the Etheridge Arms to see the arrival of the coach that was to bring the bridegroom, who was about to marry *their* lady, gathered once more in the tap-room, to get all the news they could from the servants, who had stopped there for refreshment on their way to the castle, whither they were bound to prepare for the reception of the baron and baroness, who were coming next week.

There was the village smith, and the old laborer from Swinburne Chase, and the old cashiered groom, and all the others.

And none there were so poor that they could not invest a sixpence in drinking the health of their beloved lady, whom they quite regarded in the light of a restored queen.

And there were none so niggardly as not to spend their money and labor in adorning and illuminating the village for the reception of the happy pair who were coming to reside among them.

So that the next week when the Baron and Baroness Etheridge of Swinburne entered their feudal village, it was with the state of a king and queen entering their capital city, amid the parade of the county militia, under a triumphal arch formed of evergreens, and over a road strewn with flowers by the village maidens, who stood each side the way singing a joyous epithalamium.

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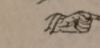
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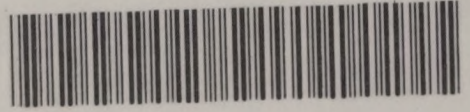
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